



# GRADE REPORTING SYSTEM: PROGRAM EVALUATION FINAL REPORT

Prepared For:



**Council Bluffs  
Community**  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

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## Introduction

This program evaluation report examines the student progress and grade reporting system in the Council Bluffs Community School District. The program evaluation was initiated by Dr. Vickie Murillo, Superintendent, to address questions and concerns regarding the grade reporting process that was initially developed more than 15 years ago. The goals of the program evaluation were as follows:

- Assess the functionality of the current system.
- Assess the extent to which the current system aligns with best practices as identified in educational research and literature.
- Identify areas for improvement.
- Provide actionable recommendations aligned with best practices identified in educational research and literature.

This report includes an analysis of qualitative and quantitative data gathered from various sources, including the grade reporting survey administered by the district, focus groups, interviews, and performance metrics to gauge the system's impact on student outcomes. The report seeks to inform district leaders as they examine practices in the district in light of the direction provided by the strategic plan that focuses on school improvement and student success.

## Program Background

While historical documents regarding the development of the CBCSD student progress reporting system either no longer exist or cannot be located, it is known that the initial process was developed about 10-15 years ago. The system was believed to have been created, at least in part, to address high school graduation rates that were below state averages and to support increased opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of standards.

## Board Policy 622

School board policies are designed to be broad and provide direction that complies with state laws and the values of the community. Policy sets overarching goals and principles that are then translated into specific procedures by staff. CBCSD Policy 622 describes the general expectations for grade reporting, including that parents must be informed of their children's development, school programs, and achievements. Expectations stated in the policy also include regular updates through various methods, such as conferences and emails, with at least two annual communications.

## Evaluation & Testing Plan

Discussion of the grade reporting system must be conducted in conjunction with the corresponding system of student assessment because grades directly reflect the assessment process and its effectiveness in measuring student learning. Council Bluffs Community School District has articulated its assessment system in the 2023-24 Evaluation and Testing Plan. This plan is built upon a foundation of a solid philosophical framework that includes belief statements, goals, and guiding principles. While the plan

lays out the parameters for summative assessment administration and data collection, it also acknowledges the imperative role of formative assessment and data analysis as the basis for initial classroom instruction and intervention.

The Evaluation and Testing Plan outlines a continuous assessment and data analysis system to monitor each student's proficiency level to support teacher decision-making in the classroom. The plan is well aligned with Board Policy 622 and articulates the expectation that teachers use formative assessment to guide instruction, involve students and parents in learning and assessment progress, and communicate progress regularly.

## Grade Reporting Procedures

While Board policy establishes broad, overarching guidelines that define a framework and direction, administrative procedures should provide detailed, practical steps and processes for implementation that comply with the board policies. CBCSD has developed administrative procedures for implementing grade reporting at the elementary and secondary levels.

### *Elementary grading guidelines*

More information regarding grade reporting procedures can be found in the document titled "Elementary Grading Guidelines." This document is a brief set of guidelines rather than a detailed description of procedures. The primary audience is teachers, and it was most recently updated in November 2023. This document states that student grades will be based on the review of student achievement using evidence collected during each quarter and that grades should be regularly recorded throughout the grading period. Suggestions are provided for collecting evidence to determine performance levels in each elementary content area.

A four-level proficiency scale is provided with a descriptor for each level and statements regarding implementation for students with disabilities. The document concludes with the direction that student attendance, effort, ability, engagement, improvement, attitude, and other behaviors will be reported separately from achievement. The document states that homework is not to be included in the review of student performance at the elementary level.

### *Secondary grading guidelines*

While somewhat more nuanced than elementary, the secondary grading guidelines document is also somewhat of a broad overview, rather than a detailed procedure document. It provides direction that grades will be based on student achievement in categories designated as performance and practice only. A distinction is made between practice and performance grades, with performance grades weighted at 60% and practice grades weighted at 40%. Additionally, practice grades must be provided for each performance grade.

A four-point grading scale describing each level and point value is provided. Guidelines for grading practices, including "re-dos" and directions for the frequency of grade book

updates, are also included. Additional grading features not included in the elementary guidelines, including P grades, grade overrides, grade replacements, and grade changes, are provided. These elements are described in general terms only. Finally, the secondary guidelines describe how GPA and class rank will be determined.

## Methods & Procedures

The chart below outlines the action steps, deliverables, and project timeline of the Grade Reporting System Program Evaluation.

Action Step	Deliverable	Timeline
Review existing data reports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grading system perception survey administered in 23-24</li> <li>• HS level student performance data (3-year trend data, if available)</li> <li>• Assessment grading policy and procedure documents</li> </ul>	Report of themes and patterns from existing data. This report includes draft focus group categories and focus group and interview questions.	August 2024
Virtual meeting with district team to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review themes and patterns report</li> <li>• Refine and finalize focus group categories and questions for interviews and focus groups.</li> </ul>	Finalized focus group categories Finalized focus group interview questions	Late August 2024
Individual interviews with selected current and past school board members to gather perceptions of the grading system and governance level vision for the future of student assessment and progress reporting.		Early September 2024
On-site focus groups arranged by stakeholder group.		September 16, 2024
Virtual meeting with district leadership team to review the Qualitative Data Report.	Qualitative data report including data from interviews and focus groups.	October 7, 2024
Creation of Final Report	Final report including the following sections: Introduction Program background Methods and procedures Results Conclusions and recommendations	Late October 2024

Virtual meeting with the leadership team to review the Recommendations Report.		October 27, 2024
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## Results

### Grade Reporting Survey

A survey was created and administered by the district during Spring 2024. The purpose of the survey was to elicit perceptions and opinions regarding the progress reporting process within the district. Survey questions varied slightly by stakeholder group (administrators, teachers, parents, students) to elicit information specific to the participant's experience. A complete disaggregated analysis of survey data can be accessed in the *Initial Data Report*.

#### *Summary of trends from survey data by stakeholder group*

##### **Teachers/Administrators**

- High levels of understanding of the grading system with elementary teachers slightly lower than secondary.
- Teachers are evenly split on whether they have received training with HS teachers who are most likely to report participation in professional development.
- Teachers' responses to whether the grading system is "fair and accurate" indicate that changes/improvements to the system may be beneficial.
- Discrepancies between the belief that the district's policies are fair and accurate and teachers' beliefs that their own students' grades are fair and accurate.
- There are more concerns at the high school level than at the elementary level.
- Standard Deviation calculations and the variety of responses indicate uneven perception and use of the grade reporting system.
- Administrators perceive that teachers do not fully understand the system.

##### **Parents**

- The majority of parents at all levels understand the grade reporting system.
- The majority of parents believe that the grade reporting system is helpful to communicate their child's performance with MS parents the most likely to find it helpful.
- Many parents believe the grade reporting system is fair and accurate, with a notably lower level of agreement (although still the majority) at the HS level.
- PowerSchool has strong parent support, with most MS and HS parents checking their children's progress weekly.

##### **Students**

- The majority of students at all levels understand the grade reporting system and report that grades are helpful to their understanding of their progress.
- While the majority of students report that grading is fair and accurate, there are notable concerns at all levels.

- The vast majority of HS and MS students check their grades in PowerSchool daily or weekly.

### Focus Groups & Interviews

Focus groups were conducted on September 16, 2024, in the Council Bluffs Community School District office. The groups were conducted with the following stakeholder groups: elementary school teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, principals and counselors, elementary parents, and secondary parents. Focus groups are a qualitative research method that gathers a small, diverse group of participants to discuss their perspectives on a subject. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former school board members during early September 2024. This qualitative data-gathering approach allows for in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes, experiences, and opinions through guided conversation.

The complete analysis of focus group and interview data is included in the *Qualitative Data Report*. A summary of overall trends and patterns is included below.

#### **The purpose of progress reporting/grading:**

- All stakeholder groups identified the purpose of progress reporting and grading similarly, including:
  - To monitor and communicate student growth and progress toward the mastery of standards
  - To determine the instructional needs of students, including enrichment and remediation
  - To determine successful completion of courses and credit at the HS level.

#### **Description of the CBCSD progress reporting plan:**

- Stakeholder groups, including teachers, struggled to describe the progress reporting system concisely.
- In general, teachers expressed an understanding of the big ideas/concepts in the plan but believe that there is not a shared understanding regarding the details and how it is being implemented.
- Elementary parents described the plan inaccurately as a five-point scale.
- Secondary parents described the plan in terms of specific procedures such as practice and performance grades.

#### **Benefits:**

- Teachers at all levels appreciate the flexibility and room for professional judgment, focus on student growth, and use of multiple data sources to determine grades.
- Teachers expressed support for the beliefs/values on which the plan was initially based but also believed changes over time have resulted in a drift away from those values.
- Administrators and counselors supported an equal interval scale in which behaviors are reported separately from academic grades.

- Parents at all levels appreciate teachers' work and their willingness to answer questions about their child's progress.
- Parents believe the system supports struggling students.

### **Challenges:**

- All groups expressed a desire for increased clarity and consistency of progress reporting.
- Teachers asked for more specific grade reporting procedures and regular training.
- Teachers again expressed the desire to examine the values upon which the system was built and participate in revising or updating grading practices.
- All stakeholder groups believe the reporting process should support student growth, attainment of proficiency on rigorous standards, and readiness for the next level.
- All stakeholder groups believe grade reporting should support traditional school structures such as honor roll, class rank, and earning credit at the HS level.
- All stakeholder groups (and parents in particular) expressed concern regarding the perception of the grade reporting system to those outside of the district (community, neighboring districts, post-HS institutions).
- Leaders believe that the PLC process is a structure that can allow the teacher teams to address challenges of grading consistency through the development of specific department and grade level implementation plans that align to the overall district plan.
- Challenges with the PowerSchool platform to adapt to the grade reporting system create issues with communication, perception, and fidelity to the underlying values.

### **Consistency:**

- Perhaps the strongest theme across all focus groups was a desire for more consistent implementation of progress reporting practices both in terms of teacher-to-teacher and across grade level and content area teams.
- Stakeholders expressed the desire for more explicit expectations and procedures for progress reporting, including readily accessible information, regular communication, and staff training.

## **District & Student Performance**

The *Initial Data Report* includes an examination of student achievement data, including graduation rates, to assess a potential correlation between the grading system and student outcomes. However, it is essential to note that a causal relationship cannot be established due to the limited data examined and the number of confounding variables within a school district.

### *Graduation Rates*

The Council Bluffs Community School District graduation rate increased steadily from 78.3% in the 2008- 2009 school year to 88.5% in 2014-2015. Since 2014-2015, the

graduation rate has held relatively steady, with a slight drop during 2019-2020, likely due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The graduation rates over the past five years have been near or slightly under Iowa state graduation rates.

### *ISASP Results*

Using standardized state testing data to evaluate district performance is useful, but we must be mindful of the limitations of this data. On the one hand, standardized test scores provide a quantifiable one-time snapshot of student achievement, which allows comparisons across schools and districts. However, these tests often focus narrowly on specific academic skills and may not capture the full scope of student learning and development.

The district provided five-year ISASP English and math results for grades 3-11. The assessment results are somewhat inconsistent and do not reveal clear 5-year patterns. These variations in the percentages of students who score as proficient and advanced likely reflect a range of factors, including instructional practices, student-level factors, or changes in the environment, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and associated remote learning.

Like most other school districts in the USA, there was a pause in state testing during the 2019-2020 school year when most districts were delivering remote instruction. When testing resumed in 2021-2022, schools nationwide experienced decreases in student performance. Council Bluffs student achievement data also shows evidence of post-COVID losses, with slow but gradual increases beginning in 2023. Given the inconsistencies in state assessment data, many of which are likely due to the conditions associated with the pandemic, no conclusions can be drawn about connections between the grade reporting system and student achievement patterns.

Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that the system of grade reporting has negatively impacted student outcomes. As measured by the state assessment system, student achievement has been relatively stable (without a clear pattern of increase or decrease) over the past five years. Student growth is evident in the state assessment and NWEA MAP data.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This section begins with a brief overview of current literature regarding student progress reporting and grading in K-12 schools, followed by conclusions drawn from the program evaluation activities and data analysis. Conclusions include both the strengths of the system and areas of challenge that may be addressed. Finally, recommendations are provided, which are grounded in best practices from the literature and educational research.

### **Best Practices as Identified in Educational Research & Literature**

Discussion of grading practices in the K-12 school setting must begin by answering the question, what is grading? For the purpose of this report, grading will be defined as the process of assigning a value to student progress toward mastery of learning standards.

Simply stated, grades assign value to student work. In order for a grade to be assigned, teachers make decisions about the quality and value of a wide variety of student work products.

While the definition seems straightforward, the topic of grading is sometimes referred to as the "third rail" of school improvement (Erikson, 2010). Grades are a source of great power and the criteria used for almost every decision made about students, from promotion or retention to graduation and college acceptance. Grading is a crucial part of the learning process and yet it can be a sensitive topic that evokes strong emotions, confusion, and even nostalgia.

The result of shying away from discussions about grading systems has left many school districts with "traditional" systems developed over a century ago for Industrial Revolution-era schools. Traditional systems are typically built on assumptions that have been since debunked or disproven, such as intelligence as a fixed factor, students falling along a bell curve in terms of aptitude, the notion that an abundance of high grades must be the result of an easy course, and that human behavior is controlled exclusively by extrinsic rewards and punishments. Traditional grading practices often continue without questioning or major revision because teachers implement what they experienced as students and parents' support systems reminiscent of their schooling (Feldman, 2024). Many believe, "I did fine, so it must be okay to continue in the same way."

When these traditional grading practices were created, the purpose of school was to sort and select students into a reliable rank order to determine which students would given the opportunity to learn at the high levels required by post-secondary institutions. We now understand that the purpose of school is learning at high levels for all students, as is required for success in an information age driven by rapid advances in knowledge, technology, and culture. Success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires learning, unlearning, and relearning. This shift in society and the purpose of schools creates a necessity to reconsider the basis for grades (what we grade) and how they are determined (how we grade).

We can create the conditions necessary for a productive conversation about grading practices by agreeing upon the purposes and characteristics of effective grading. The literature offers many research studies and articles describing a variety of purposes for grades. However, most can be distilled down to two central purposes: Grades should inform parents and students of the level of mastery toward learning standards while simultaneously providing teachers with the necessary information to guide instruction. Assessment scholars and respected authors O'Connor and Wormeli (2011) examined the body of grading literature and research to propose that systems of grading should be accurate, consistent, meaningful, and supportive of learning. Reeves, Jung, & O'Connor (2010) describe grading as the "wild west" of school improvement, yet there is little disagreement about the best and worst grade reporting practices among the scholars of classroom assessment.

## Grading Accuracy

Given the immense power of student grades and the wide variety of purposes for which grades are used, it is imperative that grading be as accurate as possible. According to O'Connor and Wormeli (2011, p42), "Accurate grades provide feedback, document progress, and inform our instructional decisions. Inaccurate grades play havoc with students' lives and our professional integrity." Accurate grades reflect a student's level of mastery *at the conclusion* of the learning process.

The evidence is clear that increasing grading accuracy depends on reducing or eliminating grading practices that encourage point collection rather than learning (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2016). To increase accuracy, the following practices should be avoided:

- Averaging or taking the mean of scores at all points of the learning process to calculate final grades. This practice punishes mistakes or early learning struggles instead of rewarding progress and eventual mastery. The purpose of school is to cause student growth, and it is expected that performance improves after practice.
- Similarly, assigning grades to practice assignments diminishes the value of practicing a new skill or honing an existing skill.
- The use of a zero on the 100-point scale for missing work, which falsifies the report of what a student knows and can immediately generates despair by creating a situation where students cannot earn a passing grade regardless of their understanding of the subject.
- The use of grading as punishment for misbehavior or lack of teacher-pleasing behavior. This practice ignores that the primary purpose of academic grades is to communicate information about student mastery of learning goals. When grades include punishment for behavior, the true meaning of the grade becomes unclear because it is now an uncertain mix of achievement and behavior.

## Grading Consistency

Consistency in grading means that students with the same level of mastery of skills and concepts should receive the same grades, even if they are in different teachers' classes or different schools within the district. In order to achieve consistency, districts must establish:

- Clarity of purpose by coming to a consensus about the primary purpose of grades and the values upon which a grading system.
- Transparency regarding the purpose and values reflected in the grading system.
- Clearly defined performance standards available to all stakeholders that describe what it looks like at each level of performance.
- Thorough and clear policies and procedures that include sufficient detail for teachers, students, parents, and leaders to implement the system as intended with fidelity to the purpose and values of grading established by the district.

**Note:** Best practice does not dictate a number of levels but rather a range. According to O'Connor & Wormeli (2010): "Although there is no one right number of levels, fewer than 10 is advisable because there is a limit to how well the English language can describe different levels and how well teachers, students, and parents could

understand the differences among them... The two most highly regarded high school programs in the world only use levels—advanced placement uses five levels, and the International Baccalaureate uses seven. Once there is agreement on the number of levels, schools and districts need to develop and publish clear, generic descriptions of each. These would then form the basis for the performance standards used in the classroom—marking schemes, rubrics, exemplars, and so forth."

## Meaningful Grades

A meaningful grade in a K-12 school reflects a student's actual understanding and mastery of the subject matter rather than just their ability to complete tasks or follow instructions. It provides transparent feedback on strengths and areas for improvement, guiding the student and teacher in supporting continued growth. The levels of specificity may vary from grade to grade and among content areas. For example, elementary-level grading may differ from that in secondary classrooms.

## Grades that are Supportive of Learning

As stated earlier in this report, grades assign value to student work. Therefore, they are somewhat limited in their ability to fully support student learning without a meaningful assessment system. A system of assessment includes formative measures that provide students feedback during the learning process (practice) and summative assessments that provide feedback near the end of a learning process to determine overall mastery. In order to be beneficial to learning, formative and summative feedback must be distinct categories.

In the best-case scenario, formative assessments provide descriptive feedback to students, followed by opportunities to revise in light of that feedback. Formative feedback supports the learning process by allowing feedback and coaching along the way, like an athletic coach providing feedback during practice. On the other hand, summative assessments evaluate outcomes and, in the athletic coach's example, are comparable to game-day performance.

## Building a Grading System

Revising or building a cohesive grade reporting system begins by establishing a common set of definitions and values. School communities must use the literature to develop consensus on the purpose of grades and the values upon which their system will be based. This agreement creates a shared vision for success and is created in collaboration with teachers, leaders, students, and families. Once the vision is established, educators use their expertise and experience to design a clear set of procedures and protocols that support the vision and state how grading will be implemented in a consistent manner to support student learning.

In "Starting the Conversation about Grading" (Educational Leadership, November 2011), Susan M. Brookhart makes the following recommendation:

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that getting sidetracked with details of scaling (letters, percentages, or rubrics? Zeros or not? No Ds or Fs?) or policies

(What should we do with late or missing work? How can we report behavior? What will we do about academic honors and awards?) before you tackle the question of what a grade means in the first place will lead to trouble. Logic, my own experience, and the research and practice of others (Cox & Olsen, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2010; McMunn, Schenck, & McColskey, 2003) all scream that this is the case. Grading scales and reporting policies can be discussed productively once you agree on the main purpose of grades. For example, if a school decides that academic grades should reflect achievement only, then teachers need to handle missed work in some other way than assigning an F or a zero. Once a school staff gets to this point, there are plenty of resources they can use to work out the details (see Brookhart, 2011; O'Connor, 2009). The important thing is to examine beliefs and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of grades first. Without a clear sense of what grading reform is trying to accomplish, not much will happen.

### Strengths of CBCSD Grade Reporting System

Approximately a decade ago, the Council Bluffs School District implemented research-based reforms to its grade reporting system. While some adjustments have been made over the following years to address implementation challenges, the district continues to operate mostly outside a traditional yet outdated grading framework. After 10 years of implementation, it is now an opportune time for the district to renew and enhance its grading system to ensure it continues to meet their needs. While improvements are necessary to realign the system to a purpose and set of values, the district remains ahead of the curve due to the practices already in place. These foundational elements position the district to build upon its practices and lead further innovations to improve its system of grade reporting.

The following CBCSD grade reporting practices are closely aligned with best practices as identified in educational literature and research:

- Published purpose and core beliefs regarding grading practices available on elementary and secondary grading guidelines.
- Defined performance standards expressed on an equal interval scale with four performance levels that include general descriptions in the categories of “exceeds,” “meets,” “approaches,” and “does not approach.”
- Recognition that learning occurs over time with elementary grades based on the review of student achievement using multiple pieces of evidence collected during each quarter.
- Provision of sample evidence to be collected by content area at the elementary level.
- Written acknowledgement that special education students must have the opportunity to master learning standards and will not be penalized for legally allowed accommodations and modifications.
- Behavior reported separately from academic grades at the elementary level. Acknowledgment at the secondary level that behavior grades will “generally” be reported separately.

- Homework is viewed as "practice" at the elementary level and not included in grades meant to express mastery of learning standards.
- Grades identified as "practice" or "performance" at the secondary level, with practice grades as less than half (40%) of the final grade.
- Practices that reflect the belief that learning occurs over time and at a different pace for each student, such as retakes on summative assessments after intervention or re-teaching.
- General guidelines for practices that acknowledge circumstances where students require the opportunity to master material after the completion of a semester, such as grade replacement and grade change at the secondary level.
- Guidelines for calculating GPA and class rank are provided for the secondary level.
- Use of PowerSchool to make grades readily apparent at the secondary level.

### Challenges with the CBCSD Grade Reporting System

Despite the alignment of many aspects of the current grading system to best practices, challenges that require attention have emerged. Stakeholder feedback has revealed a clear need for revisions and enhancements to the system. While there are published grading guidelines for secondary and elementary levels, the absence of detailed implementation plans and ongoing professional development has contributed to inconsistencies among teachers and misunderstandings among external stakeholders including parents.

The system was developed over ten years ago, and over time, institutional memory has faded, and small changes to address specific issues have resulted in mission drift, with the system moving away from the original core values upon which it was created. These issues have compounded the need for a comprehensive review and a structured approach to ensure that the system is aligned with its research-based foundations, the district strategic goals, including its mission and vision, and that it delivers the intended outcomes. Addressing these issues will be critical in ensuring the district's continued effectiveness and commitment to continuous improvement.

A key issue has been the misunderstanding of equal interval performance levels, which has led to the perception that courses lack rigor and that there are low expectations for students. Many stakeholders, including parents and educators, have misinterpreted the performance levels, comparing them to traditional grading scales without equal intervals (100-point scale) and assuming they signify reduced academic demands. This has created a belief that students are not being sufficiently challenged, even though district assessment results do not support this view. The data shows that student performance remains consistent and student growth is occurring. However, the perception of low expectations persists among some stakeholders, underscoring the need for more precise communication and a better understanding of how these performance standards are applied and how they reflect academic expectations across the district. While the use of the Student Information System, PowerSchool was listed as a strength, it is also a challenge. Limitations of the system to address an equal interval scale have added to the misinformation and confusion reported by stakeholders.

## Recommendations

Ensuring accurate and consistent grading and grade reporting are essential elements of an effective school district and benefit all learners, not just those who are struggling. When CBCSD implemented the current system a decade or so ago, the practices aligned with research, and the district was ahead of the curve on this work. Since that time, many other districts across the nation have successfully challenged traditional grade reporting practices that no longer support the mission of public schools to ensure high levels of learning and rigor for all students rather than a select few. That said, moving forward in a top-down fashion to change grading practices will frustrate educators, students, and families (Reeves, Jung, & O'Connor, 2017). A practical starting point involves stakeholders in discussing the values upon which a grading system can be built or adjusted. Once these values are established, teams of educators can build or revise processes to align with the values.

- 1. Facilitate internal and external stakeholder development of the purpose of grade reporting and core values associated with grade reporting.**

The grading system designed a decade ago was built on a foundation of a shared philosophy and core beliefs. Now that many years have passed, an essential early step is to facilitate a collaborative process that engages both internal and external stakeholders, including educators, students, and parents, to reach a consensus on the purpose of grading and a set of shared values. The result may be a re-affirmation of the existing values, revision, or a complete rewriting, and facilitators must be open to the outcome. Stakeholders who engage in this process need exposure to and understanding of the related literature and the district strategic goals. An important consideration is that consensus is reached when all stakeholders have had a say, and the will of the group has emerged and is evident, even to those who disagree (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). This step is critical for aligning expectations and ensuring that the grading system reflects the values and goals of the district while addressing stakeholder concerns.

- 2. Update board policy**

As part of its governance role, the School Board sets policy and direction for the district. An update of policy may be necessary if significant shifts are recommended by the collaborative purpose and values committee.

- 3. Educators develop comprehensive implementation plans.**

Once consensus regarding purpose and values are achieved and board policy is updated (if necessary), detailed implementation plans should be created to ensure consistent application of the grading system across all schools. This work is clearly in the purview of trained educators who are tasked with translating the values into practical actions and practices.

Committees may start this work by comparing current practices to values, research, best practices, and the district strategic plan. An alignment matrix is helpful to identify alignment and gaps. Clear and specific implementation plans can then be developed and should include timelines, recommendations regarding teacher training and ongoing professional development, and accountability measures. These committees are likely to work at the grade band level (elementary, middle, and high school) so that plans are specific to the level of students they serve. Committees can develop draft plans, but an opportunity should be provided for all district educators to provide feedback.

Although it is easy to recommend that committees should be developed to re-affirm and re-conceptualize grading practices, this is difficult, time-consuming, and often tedious work. Grading is an emotional subject, and each educator brings unique perspectives and experiences, which can lead to differing opinions on what constitutes effective grading. Balancing the need for consistency with the desire for flexibility in assessing student progress adds another layer of difficulty, making it essential for committee members to engage in ongoing dialogue and collaboration to reach agreements and that skilled facilitation is provided for each committee.

After the grade-level committees finalize their recommendations and set key parameters, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)—which consist of teacher teams at each grade or department level—take over to continue the work. The PLCs use four guiding questions as a foundation for their implementation plans: What should students know and be able to do at this grade level or in this course? How will we assess their understanding? How will we support students who are not yet proficient? How will we extend learning for students who are already proficient? These questions help PLCs translate the broader goals set by the grade-band committees into concrete, actionable plans for each team.

#### **4. Enhance stakeholder communication and training.**

All work of individuals, the board, or committees to update the grade reporting system should be transparent to internal and external stakeholders. Timeline, action steps, reports, and final outcomes should be readily available and easy to locate on the district and school websites. It is recommended that communication be consistently connected to the consensus developed values and the district strategic plan.

Communication and training efforts can then be strengthened by offering targeted professional development for educators and informational sessions for parents and students. Professional development must continue over time and not be disrupted or discontinued by competing initiatives. Training should also be provided in new teacher induction programs. These efforts should help clarify the revised grading standards and their alignment with academic rigor, address misconceptions, and build confidence in the system.

Consistent and deliberate steps must be taken to counter the perception of low expectations by promoting student achievement data, highlighting examples of rigorous coursework, and showcasing how the grading system supports high standards for all students. Communication in school districts is always an area of need. This is not specific to CBCSD. The further away the stakeholder is from day-to-day school operations, the more likely that stakeholder is to have misperceptions.

Leaders need to be ready and willing to address challenges and difficult questions. Reeves, Jung, and O'Connor (2010) warn, "Educators and families will, rightfully, demand to know why these initiatives are necessary. Teachers will want to know what is so wrong with current grading practices. Families will want to know why schools are changing from the type of grades they are familiar with. Leaders must be prepared to answer these and the dozens of other questions that will arise."

**5. Increase clarity in reporting student progress.**

Ensure the transparency of progress reports by providing clear, detailed explanations of student performance in relation to the agreed-upon standards and the implementation plans developed by educators. This will help stakeholders better understand how grades reflect student learning and the rigor embedded in the system. This is a particularly difficult challenge, given the current limitations of PowerSchool. Efforts to collaborate with the PowerSchool representatives to customize the system may be necessary.

**6. Regularly review and adjust the system.**

Establish a process for ongoing review and adjustment of the grading system, incorporating stakeholder feedback and assessment data. Brief annual assessments can be conducted with a complete program evaluation every 4-5 years.

## Resources and Additional Reading

### Journal and Trade Magazine Articles

Alex, P. (2024). Time to pull the plug on traditional grading? *Teachers and Teaching*, 22(4). <https://www.educationnext.org/time-to-pull-plug-on-traditional-grading-supporters-say-mastery-based-grading-could-promote-equity/>

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