



NORTH
KANSAS CITY
SCHOOLS

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STANDARDS-BASED LEARNING HANDBOOK

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Introduction

In the spring of 2023, North Kansas City Schools embarked on a transformative journey to enhance **clarity**, **accuracy**, and **fairness** in how we support and communicate student learning. This work has been grounded in a collective effort to ensure that every student clearly understands what they are expected to learn, why it matters, and how they can continue to grow. Our transition to Standards-Based Learning (SBL) in North Kansas City Schools reflects our commitment to focusing on learning over point accumulation, proficiency over memorization, and progress over compliance.

At the heart of this shift is the development of proficiency scales, designed to provide a clear roadmap for students, parents, and teachers alike. These scales help define what success looks like at each stage of learning and allow students to monitor their progress, engage with feedback, and take ownership of their growth. Through this process, we aim to empower students as learners, ensuring they leave North Kansas City Schools prepared for real-world problem-solving, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

We are deeply grateful to the educators at our vanguard schools – Maplewood, Nashua, Chapel Hill, Davidson, Eastgate, Gateway, Northgate, and North Kansas City High School – who have led this important work by exploring and implementing these practices in their classrooms. We also appreciate the support and collaboration of NKC-NEA, whose partnership has helped ensure that this transition is informed by the voices and expertise of teachers.

This handbook serves as a guide to support a shared understanding of district expectations, meaningful assessment practices, and student-centered instruction. By working together, we are not just refining how we assess learning – we are transforming how we inspire, challenge, and prepare students for success in college, careers, and life.



Dr. Chad Sutton
Deputy Superintendent
North Kansas City Schools

District Task Force

We would like to thank the following staff members of North Kansas City Schools for their time and effort in providing the district with guidance, feedback, and leadership throughout this journey.

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North Kansas City Schools Mission Statement

As relentless champions for all students, North Kansas City Schools' mission is to develop self-aware, authentically empowered, future-ready learners through a rich array of purposeful learning opportunities in collaborative communities of belonging that are:

- culturally affirming
- academically challenging
- experiential and exploratory

for each student.

Grading Purpose Statement

In NKC Schools, the purpose of grading is to use evidence to communicate the most recent progress toward proficiency in specific learning standards. Effective feedback guides student growth to empower them as agents of their own learning.

Core Belief

We believe that standards-based learning and grading ensures **clarity**, **accuracy**, and **fairness**. By aligning grading practices with clearly defined learning standards, we provide students, families, and educators with transparent and consistent measures of proficiency. This approach emphasizes growth and achievement by evaluating a body of evidence that reflects students' learning over time. Through clear communication of expectations and meaningful feedback, we aim to build **confidence** in our students, empowering them to take ownership of their learning and fostering a belief in their ability to succeed.

Grading Principles

- Principle 1** ► Grades will be based on clearly specified standards.
- Principle 2** ► Evidence used for grading will be aligned to the standard.
- Principle 3** ► Not everything should be included in grades, and students will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.
- Principle 4** ► Grades will reflect a body of evidence collected over time.
- Principle 5** ► Academic grades will be separate from behavioral and citizenship expectations.

Proficiency Scale

A proficiency scale clarifies expectations aligned to Missouri Learning Standards and ensures **fair, accurate** measures of student understanding for teachers, students and families.



Proficient

Students independently met the learning target related to the standard.



Nearing Proficient

Students demonstrate understanding of most concepts/skills related to the standard.



Developing

Students demonstrate understanding of simpler concepts/skills related to the standard.



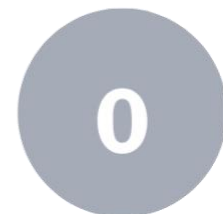
Not Yet

Even with help, students have limited understanding of concept/skills related to the standard.

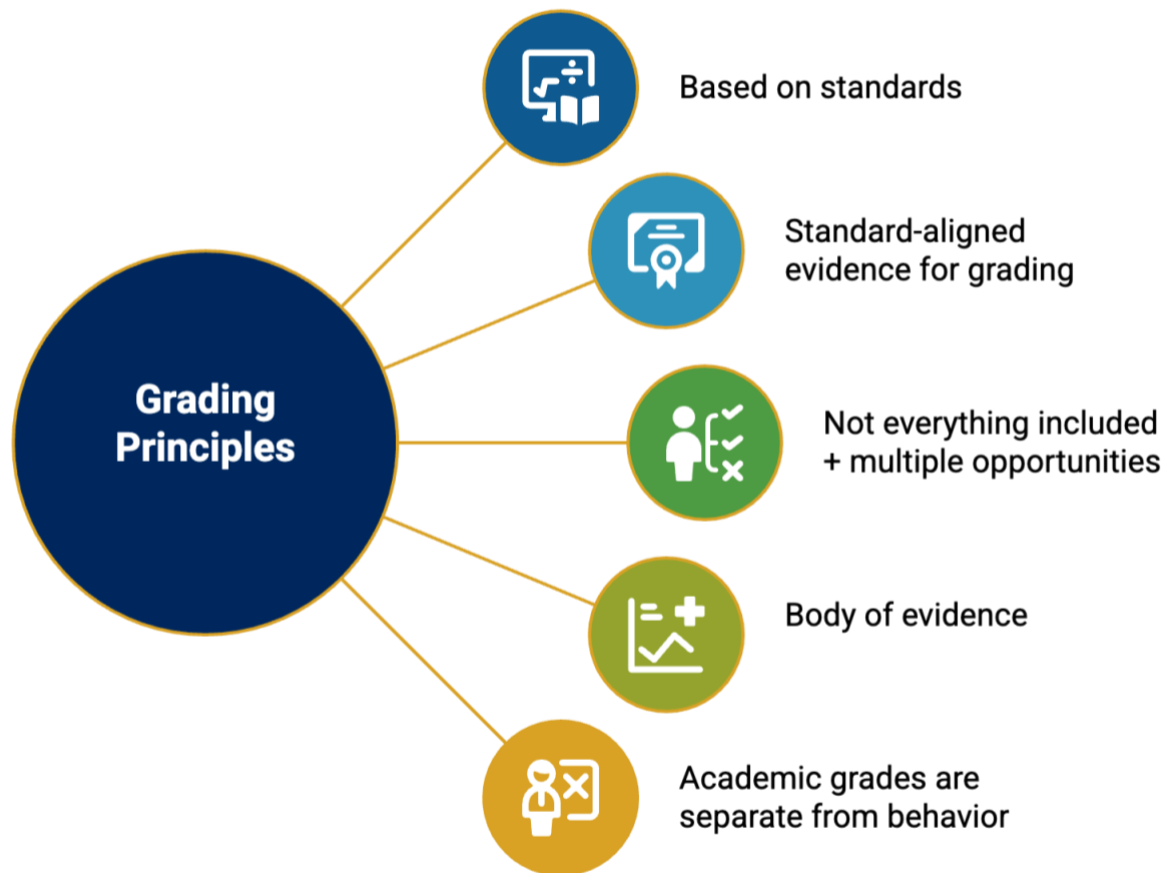


No Evidence

There is no demonstrated understanding or insufficient evidence to assess learning at this time.



Five Principles of Grading



Grading Principle No. 1

Grades will be based on clearly specified standards.



Why does it matter?

Grades based on clearly specified standards provide a framework that promotes **clarity**, **accuracy**, and **fairness**.

For students, this approach offers a clear understanding of where they are in their learning journey and what steps they need to take for growth. It builds **confidence** by reducing uncertainty and allowing them to focus on mastering key skills and knowledge (Brookhart et al., 2019). Transparent expectations also encourage accountability, helping students take ownership of their progress and develop essential skills like self-regulation (Brookhart et al., 2019).

For teachers, aligning grades with specific standards improves consistency and objectivity in grading, ensuring **fairness** and reducing subjective bias (Chapuis et al., 2012; University of Waterloo, 2020). This framework provides teachers with clear guidelines for assessing student progress, helping to identify strengths and areas for improvement (Great Schools Partnership, 2017; Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012).

► THE BIG PICTURE

Basing grades on clearly specified standards ensures that assessments are transparent, and aligned with meaningful learning targets, benefiting students, teachers, and families alike.

For parents, clear standards provide transparency and allow them to better understand their child's progress, enabling them to offer targeted support. Knowing that grades are based on consistent, unbiased criteria builds trust and ensures that evaluations are fair and reflective of actual performance (Chapuis et al., 2012).

What might this look like in the classroom?

To increase reliability in grading, a consistent proficiency-based scale is used across all classrooms. The use of the proficiency scales promotes consistency by providing a uniform way to measure and report student performance, helping to build trust and **fairness** of the grading system (Tovani, 2008). Assessments are specifically aligned with clearly defined learning targets and standards, guaranteeing that grades accurately reflect students' proficiency in the content (Guskey & Jung, 2013).

Transparency is crucial for students to meet the high expectations of their teachers. Clear, accessible expectations, such as a proficiency scale, ensure that all students understand what is expected of them, reducing confusion and promoting equal opportunities for success (Winkelmes, 2013). The language used in grading and feedback is designed to be easily understood by both students and families, eliminating barriers to comprehension and ensuring shared understanding (Brookhart et al., 2019).

Objectivity is maintained by basing grades on a body of evidence collected over time, which is directly aligned with standards and supported by guided practice. This reduces the risk of subjective bias and ensures evaluations are grounded in students' actual performance (Chapuis et al., 2012).

Finally, the grading process is student-centered. Students are encouraged to gather evidence of their learning, fostering a sense of ownership and building **confidence**. This approach makes grades a meaningful reflection of their growth and effort, empowering students to actively engage in their educational journey (Center for Professional Education of Teachers, 2018; Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012).

Together, these practices ensure that the grading system is an **accurate representation of student learning**.

► SUMMING IT UP

“The more that grades are based on **clearly** articulated learning criteria, the more reliable and objective they become as indicators of student achievement” (Guskey, 2015).

Grading Principle No. 2

Evidence used for grading will be aligned to the standard.



Why does it matter?

This principle ensures that formal and informal assessments (evidence) measure what students are expected to learn, providing a fair and valid representation of their knowledge and skills. Research states that alignment between learning expectations and assessment improves validity (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), promotes learning through **clarity** (Black & Wiliam, 1998), provides for a more precise evaluation of student performance (Marzano, 2006), facilitates targeted instruction and interventions (Brookhard, 2017), and supports a more accurate reflection of student proficiency (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

► THE BOTTOM LINE

Assessments should measure progress toward the standard.

What might this look like in the classroom?

Effective instructional practices involve aligning teaching strategies with clear standards, providing support for students, and using evidence to drive consistent and objective evaluation. To facilitate this, educators provide students with **proficiency scales** that clearly outline learning expectations and the criteria for success (O'Connor, 2011). These scales serve as a guide for both students and teachers, promoting transparency and focus on essential learning targets.

Items in the gradebook are directly linked to specific proficiency scales tied to learning standards, ensuring alignment between instructional activities and the curriculum goals (O'Connor, 2011). This structure helps maintain consistency and reinforces the connection between classroom tasks and measurable outcomes.

Collaborative efforts are essential for ensuring **fairness** and reliability in assessments. **Professional Learning Teams** (PLTs) regularly review and discuss common assessments, identifying inconsistencies and mitigating potential biases. This practice reduces subjectivity and enhances the validity of assessment results (O'Connor, 2018).

To support students in meeting the learning expectations outlined on proficiency scales, teachers provide **scaffolds and differentiated instruction** tailored to individual needs. These strategies help students access challenging content and progress at their own pace, ensuring opportunities for success (Brookhart, 2017).

With coaching and guidance from their teachers, students can actively track their learning progress using proficiency scales. This practice not only fosters student accountability but also promotes self-reflection and a growth mindset (Adrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Teachers complement this process by assessing students through the use of the proficiency scale, capturing a comprehensive body of evidence across the learning cycle. These records provide a holistic view of student achievement and inform instructional adjustments (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This approach reflects a balanced, evidence-based approach to instruction and assessment, creating a supportive environment for student success.



Grading Principle No. 3

Not everything should be included in grades, and students will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.



Why does it matter?

When scores for everything students do are entered into the gradebook, the purpose of grades can become unclear. To ensure that grades are meaningful and accurately represent a student's proficiency in learning targets, grades should focus primarily on evidence specifically designed to evaluate learning at the proficient level. These serve as evaluations of learning at a specific point in time rather than a compilation of all activities and tasks completed.

It is critical for parents, teachers, and students to recognize that **learning is a process** – a journey in which students build knowledge, understanding, and skills through instruction, meaningful engagement, feedback, and self-reflection. For this process to work effectively, students must believe that taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from mistakes are integral parts of growth.

Rick Wormeli, an expert in standards-based grading, reminds us that “We don’t penalize students in sports for learning the rules during practice or making mistakes in rehearsals; instead, we support them until they’re game-ready or performance-ready.”

In the classroom, this translates to not penalizing students when they are learning new content or practicing a new skill.

► THE BIG PICTURE

Providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding supports our belief that learning doesn't happen on the same day for every student. What matters is growth over time.

What might this look like in the classroom?

The approach to providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning is pivotal in shaping students' attitudes toward learning over time. In order to support student motivation, the most recent and consistent evidence should be used, as this clearly communicates the importance of continuous learning and improvement. It reflects a belief in students' ability to grow and recognizes their most current level of understanding. This approach sends a powerful message: learning is an ongoing process, and the most recent demonstration of understanding is the most relevant.

This philosophy aligns with real-world practices beyond high school. For example, in career-related certifications or licensure exams, such as a CPA exam or a certification in IT (e.g., CompTIA or AWS certifications), the most recent assessment determines whether a candidate is certified, not an average of prior attempts. This mirrors the importance of continuous improvement and ensures that proficiency is evaluated at its most current and accurate level.

Welding certifications through AWS allow unlimited retakes, typically after additional training. They're required for many jobs and are specific to processes like MIG, TIG or stick welding. Electrician certifications, such as Journeyman or Master licenses, generally allow multiple retakes (varies by state), usually with a waiting period and re-registration. Another example includes teachers seeking licensure often take the Praxis exam, in which only the most recent assessment determines whether they pass, not an average of previous attempts. Similarly, professionals in fields such as healthcare, technology, and finance take certification exams (e.g., NCLEX for nurses, AWS certification for cloud computing, or the CPA exam for accountants).

In these cases, an individual's most recent performance reflects their readiness and competency, underscoring the idea that improvement over time is what truly matters.

Tom Guskey, a leading voice in grading reform, emphasized, "Grades should reflect what students know and are able to do, not how they behave or the speed at which they learn."

Grading Principle No. 4

Grades will reflect a body of evidence collected over time.



A **body of evidence** is a collection of multiple pieces of student work that demonstrates what students know and are able to do, aligned to a proficiency scale to measure their progress and achievement over time.

Why does it matter?

Collecting a body of evidence on student learning rather than relying solely on an average is essential for accurately reflecting a student's understanding and abilities. Research **shows learning** is a process, and students often need multiple opportunities to engage with and master concepts over time (Guskey, 2015). Averaging grades on a 100-point scale can penalize students for early struggles, even if they demonstrate significant growth and proficiency later in the learning cycle.

A body of evidence approach allows educators to evaluate student progress holistically, using a variety of tasks and assessments aligned to clear proficiency scales, which ensures a more **comprehensive and fair measurement** of their achievement (Brookhart, 2017). This method also supports a growth mindset, as students see that their efforts to improve are valued and reflected in their grades, fostering motivation and persistence (Dweck, 2006). By focusing on evidence, educators can prioritize proficiency and ensure that grades communicate an accurate picture of student learning.

What might this look like in the classroom?

A **body of evidence** in SBL is a collection of student work that demonstrates their progress and proficiency in specific learning standards. This includes a variety of formal and informal approaches, such as tests, projects, conferring, exit tickets, and observations, which collectively provide a comprehensive picture of student achievement. By examining multiple pieces of evidence, teachers ensure that grades are based on consistent and reliable measures of learning.

As we focus on learning over time, we emphasize the most current evidence of learning when determining grades, allowing students to recover from early mistakes and reflect their progress (Guskey, 2015). This approach tracks improvement by analyzing multiple assessments and activities, reflecting a student's ability to meet expectations. It ensures that evaluations emphasize learning as a continuous process.

Who would you want to pack your parachute?

The example below demonstrates the importance of utilizing current evidence to accurately represent student learning – not relying solely on the average score. In the first table, you will see that Student A has a significantly higher average score after multiple assessments on packing a parachute. However, in the second table, you can clearly see that Student A has not improved through the assessment process. However, Student B has significantly improved, earning a perfect score on the last two assessments. In a standards-based grading system, Student B would receive a higher grade than Student A, as the most recent evidence demonstrates they have mastered packing a parachute.

Student	Average Success Rate				
Student A	80%				
Student B	70%				

Student	Evidence 1 20 packs	Evidence 2 20 packs	Evidence 3 20 packs	Evidence 4 20 packs	Evidence 5 20 packs	Average Success Rate
Student A	16	16	16	16	16	80%
Student B	4	12	14	20	20	70%

Grading Principle No. 5

Academic grades will be separate from behavioral and citizenship expectations.



Why does it matter?

Research underscores the importance of separating non-academic factors from academic achievement to ensure that grades accurately reflect student learning. Alfie Kohn (1993) argues that traditional grading practices, which rely on rewards and punishments, undermine students' intrinsic motivation. When grades are used as a tool to control behavior, students often prioritize achieving high marks over truly learning the standards.

Supporting this perspective, Cameron and Pierce (1994) found that extrinsic motivators, such as grades tied to effort or participation, diminish intrinsic motivation. Students become disengaged when non-academic factors influence their grades, which harms their natural curiosity and desire to learn.

When academic achievement is combined with factors like attendance, behavior, and effort, it undermines the validity of grades (Thomas Guskey, 2006, 2015). Using grades as punishments or rewards, students often experience increased anxiety and disengagement (Chastain, 2017).

Rick Wormeli (2006) also advocates for grades that reflect only academic proficiency, asserting that including behavior distorts their meaning. Grades that focus solely on academic achievement provide clearer feedback for students and other stakeholders, enhancing their utility as an accurate measure of learning.

While attendance, effort, behavior, and participation are important, research suggests these factors should be addressed and communicated separately to preserve the integrity of academic grades (Wormeli, 2006; Guskey 2015). By detailing these elements independently, educators hold students accountable for their behaviors without compromising grades as indicators of academic proficiency.

In North Kansas City Schools, we have a responsibility to assess and report on what students truly **know and can do** as outlined by our proficiency scales. Including non-academic factors in grades diminishes their **accuracy** and meaning. By separating these elements, we uphold high academic standards, foster intrinsic motivation, and promote assessment practices that support all learners.

What might this look like in the classroom?

Grades should accurately reflect students' progress toward meeting learning standards and be grounded in clear, objective evidence of learning. According to Guskey (2015), effective grading practices align assessments with learning objectives to communicate a student's level of proficiency. Wormeli (2006) emphasizes that grades should evaluate the quality of work related to standards, excluding non-academic factors like behavior or effort. By focusing on evidence of learning, teachers provide actionable and meaningful feedback, ensuring **fairness**, and supporting student growth and intrinsic motivation.

Awarding points for extra credit or bonus opportunities undermines the integrity of grades as measures of achievement. O'Connor (2010) highlights that grades should reflect progress toward standards, while inflating them with factors such as effort or compliance distorts the understanding of a student's academic proficiency. Positive behaviors, though important, should be recognized through other means that do not interfere with the grading process.

While non-academic factors such as attendance, effort, behavior, and participation are important, they are addressed separately from academic grades to keep grades a clear measure of what students know and can do. Our district remains committed to holding students accountable for these behaviors through our disciplinary process, schoolwide expectations, and other systems outside of the gradebook. When students fail to demonstrate effort or participation, teachers and administrators intervene through established supports and consequences, ensuring these behaviors are addressed without compromising the accuracy of academic grades.

In certain courses like PE, speech, music, and journalism, factors like effort and participation may influence achievement, however, grades must remain focused exclusively on proficiency in the standards. It is crucial to ensure that the assessment focuses on the specific skill being demonstrated rather than simply evaluating whether an attempt was made.

► WHY IT MATTERS

Separating non-academic factors ensures **fairness**, **accuracy**, and meaningful feedback.

Traditional Grading System vs. Standards-Based Learning

The modern assessment paradigm demands that the traditional grading practices evolve. **Standards-based learning (SBL)** offers a more accurate approach to grading by focusing on students' proficiency in specific learning objectives rather than an aggregation of points that may include non-academic factors. Research shows that traditional 100-point scales often fail to provide meaningful feedback about a student's actual understanding, as grades can be inflated or penalized by factors unrelated to learning (Guskey, 2015).

Standards-based learning, on the other hand, emphasizes clear criteria aligned with learning standards, enabling educators to provide targeted feedback and supporting students in identifying areas for growth. Moreover, SBL fosters a growth mindset, as students see their progress in terms of skill proficiency rather than a fixed grade (Brookhart, 2017). By promoting consistency and transparency, SBL reduces grade variability and ensures that grades more accurately reflect students' knowledge and abilities, preparing them for future success.



Traditional Grading

Focuses on points and non-academic factors



Standards-Based Learning

Emphasizes proficiency and growth

A detailed comparison is available on the following page.

Traditional Grading System

Standards-Based Grading System

Based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, daily work). One grade per subject.	Based on standards with a proficiency level for each priority standard.
Grades may include non-academic factors such as attendance, contributing to classroom supplies, behavior and effort.	Grades are a reflection of academic achievement; non-academic factors such as attendance, behavior, and effort are reported separately.
Individual classroom teachers develop their own measures and basis for evaluating student progress.	Based on learning targets and grade level/content area standards.
Based on a percentage system; often norm-referenced; learning criteria not clear.	Proficiency-based using a limited number of levels of learning to increase accuracy ; standards being measured are known to all.
Can include extra credit or zeros on a 100- point scale and group scores.	Only measures achievement - no extra credit or zeros on a 100-point scale. Zeros are given on a five-point scale (0-4).
Include every score regardless of when it was collected.	Emphasize the more recent and most consistent evidence of learning.

Modified from the Independence Community School District.

Reporting Standards-Based Grades

In a standards-based learning (SBL) classroom, **the goal is to provide clear, accurate, and fair measures of student learning** by using proficiency scales aligned with learning standards. Students in North Kansas City Schools will begin to receive letter grades beginning in sixth grade.

These scales offer a framework for assessing and communicating student progress, ensuring academic achievement is evaluated separately from non-academic factors. In North Kansas City Schools, this approach enables teachers to deliver accurate and meaningful feedback that reflects student learning. By emphasizing proficiency in standards, separating academic and non-academic factors, and fostering a growth mindset, educators can support effective assessment practices.

Use proficiency scales to align instruction and assessments with standards

Proficiency scales break down learning standards into clear levels of achievement, ranging from foundational understanding to proficiency (Marzano, 2010). These levels help teachers and students focus on learning progress rather than cumulative scores. North Kansas City Schools' proficiency scale includes:

- **Proficient:** Students independently met the learning target related to the standard.
- **Nearing Proficient:** Students demonstrate understanding of most concepts/skills related to the standard.
- **Developing:** Students demonstrate understanding of simpler concepts/skills related to the standard.
- **Not Yet:** Even with help, students have limited understanding of concept/skills related to the standard.
- **No Evidence:** There is no demonstrated understanding or insufficient evidence to assess learning at this time.

In elementary, learning will be reported as P, NP, DEV, and NY. At the secondary level (6-12), students will receive a traditional letter grade.

Key Considerations for Special Populations in Standards-Based Grading

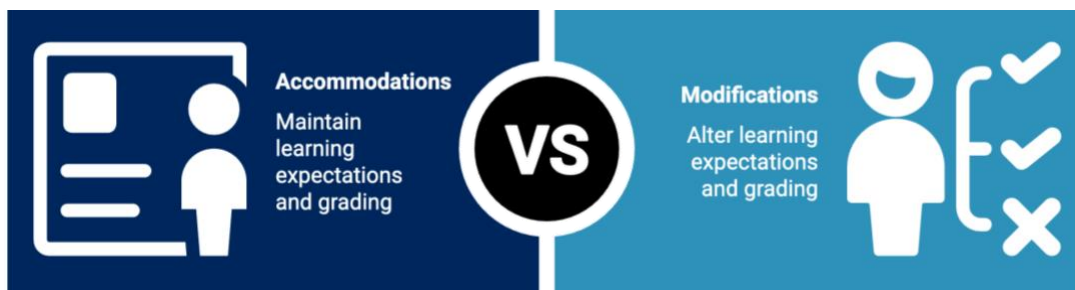
Special Education Students

Grading Aligned with Standards Using the Inclusive Grading Model:

- Students should be graded based on their progress toward **grade-level standards** tied to proficiency scales with accommodations unless an IEP specifies **modified grading** is required.
- When modifications are in place, grades should reflect proficiency in the **modified expectation**, not the grade-level standard.

Accommodations Do NOT Change Learning Expectations; Modifications Do:

- Accommodations **do not** alter what is being assessed and do not impact grading practices (e.g., graphic organizers, checklists, extended time).
- Modifications **change** the learning expectation, do impact grading practices, and should be documented in comments of grade reports (e.g. “based on modified expectations”).



Progress Monitoring and Reporting:

- In addition to grade cards, parents are provided separate progress reports documenting how students are advancing toward specific **IEP goals**.

The annual IEP revision includes updates to students' present level of performance which describes students' strengths, challenges, and next steps and is the basis for services and support needed.

English Language Learners (ELL)

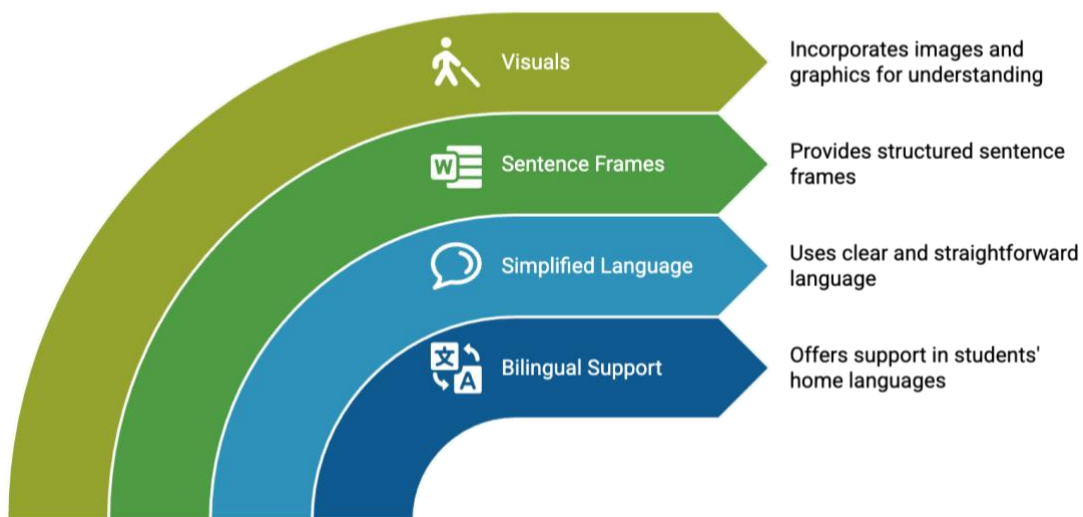
Assess Content Proficiency Separately from Language Proficiency:

- Grading should reflect a student's **understanding of content**, not their English proficiency, unless language is explicitly being assessed.

Use Linguistically Appropriate Assessments:

- Provide **bilingual support, simplified language, sentence frames, and visuals** to ensure students can access assessments.
- Offer opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding in their home language when appropriate.

Enhancing ELL Assessment Access



Align Grading with WIDA Can-Do Descriptors:

- Recognize that ELLs progress through language levels and adjust grading expectations accordingly.
- Consider **growth-based grading** for ELLs at beginning proficiency levels.

Avoid Grade Penalties for Language Acquisition Needs:

- Do not penalize students for errors related to language development (e.g., grammar, spelling) unless these skills are part of the assessment criteria.

Students with 504 Plans

Accommodations Ensure Access, Not Lowered Expectations:

- Grades should reflect a student's performance on **grade-level standards** with their 504 accommodation(s) in place.

No Grade Penalty for Accommodations:

- Students using accommodations should not be penalized or receive different grading scales; they are still assessed on grade-level content.

Gifted & High-Achieving Students

- Standards-based learning helps gifted and high-achieving students grow and extend their thinking.
- Scales can be used to pre-assess students and identify areas in which they may have strengths and gaps, as well as when they may already be proficient.
- Gifted students often, but not always, demonstrate proficiency with minimal instruction.
- Plan for tasks and experiences that extend beyond the expected level of proficiency and promote continued learning when students are already proficient. This means providing opportunities for deeper exploration and enrichment, rather than simply adding more of the same work.
- Extend learning through levels of thinking and depth of knowledge. Ideas may include:
 - Learning contracts and rubrics for independent studies
 - Goal-setting conferences that support student-directed experiences
 - Increased voice and choice that allow for multiple expressions of learning
 - Promotion of self-reflection

Standards-Based Learning for College & Career Readiness

In a standards-based learning environment, assessment, evidence collection, and grading practices are intentionally designed to prepare students for success beyond high school. By focusing on proficiency in learning standards, SBL ensures that students acquire the essential knowledge and skills necessary for both college and career readiness. Unlike traditional grading systems, standards-based grading (SBG) ensures that grades reflect what students know and can do, rather than an accumulation of points, effort, or behavior. This approach better prepares students for both college and career settings by fostering proficiency, accountability, and a growth mindset.

SBL Mindset Prepares Students for the Workforce

This mindset carries into the workforce, where employees are judged on their ability to meet job expectations rather than how they performed when first learning a task. A software developer, for example, isn't penalized for making mistakes while learning a new coding language; they are ultimately evaluated on their ability to write efficient, functional code by the time they are expected to perform independently. Similarly, a nursing student in clinical rotations doesn't fail for struggling with patient care initially; they receive feedback and are given the opportunity to improve before entering the profession. SBL reinforces this real-world approach by emphasizing growth and the importance of reaching proficiency, rather than punishing students for needing time to learn. By focusing on proficiency, feedback, and improvement, SBL ensures students leave high school equipped with the skills they need to succeed in college courses and adapt in professional careers. It prepares them for real-world expectations, where demonstrating competency matters far more than how quickly or easily a concept was mastered.

Do Colleges Use Standards-Based Grading?

Most colleges and universities do not follow a single, uniform grading system. In fact, professors at most universities have significant autonomy to decide how they grade, set policies for late work, allow retakes, and weight assignments. Some professors use practices aligned with standards-based grading, while others rely on traditional points and percentages. Because of this wide variation, it is essential that high school students develop the ability to adapt, take ownership of their learning, and demonstrate proficiency of clearly defined standards. With standards-based grading, our students are well prepared for this reality. They learn persistence, accountability, and how to show evidence of proficiency which

are skills that translate directly to success in college. Just as importantly, our GPA, transcripts, and class rank have always been based on letter grades. Since our system will continue to report and transcript letter grades, colleges will not see a difference. There is no impact on admissions, scholarships, or how students are evaluated after graduation.

SBL Supports Portrait of a Graduate Competencies

Standards-Based Learning and Grading directly supports the North Kansas City Schools **Portrait of a Graduate** competencies – adaptability, communication, collaboration, empathy, integrity, learner’s mindset, and problem-solving – by shifting the focus from compliance-based grading to authentic learning experiences. Students develop **adaptability** by engaging in a system that values growth over time rather than one-time performance. Through standards-based assessment, students receive meaningful feedback that strengthens **communication** skills as they engage in conversations about their learning progress with teachers and peers.

Additionally, SBL fosters **collaboration** as students work alongside educators and classmates to set goals and assess their progress toward proficiency. The emphasis on **learner’s mindset** ensures that students see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than barriers to success, preparing them for the ever-evolving demands of college and career environments. **Problem-solving** becomes an integral part of learning, as students engage in real-world applications that require critical thinking and perseverance. By focusing on proficiency rather than compliance, students also develop **integrity** and **empathy**, understanding the importance of persistence, honesty, and constructive feedback in their personal and professional lives.



PORTRAIT OF A NORTH KANSAS CITY SCHOOLS GRADUATE

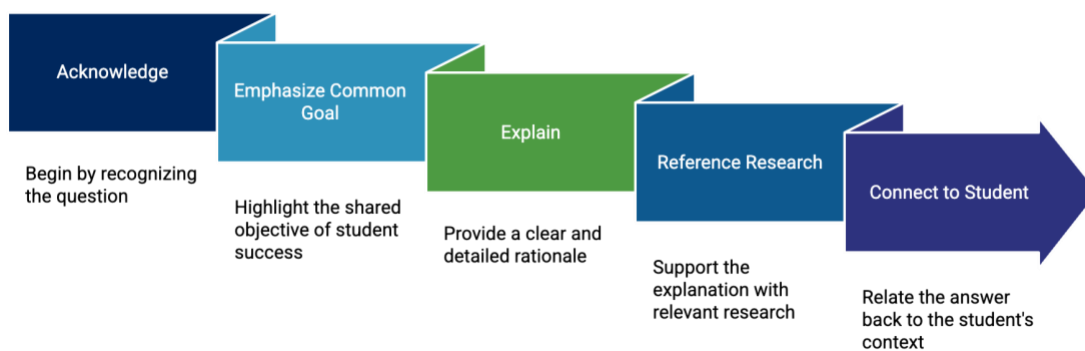
What might this look like in the classroom?

In the classroom, standards-based learning comes to life through personalized academic and career planning, digital portfolios, and proficiency-based assessments that emphasize real-world application. These practices help students track progress, build essential skills, and prepare for success in college and their career.

Frequently Asked Questions

This FAQ is designed to help school leaders confidently address the most common questions and concerns about Standards-Based Learning (SBL). As families, staff, and students navigate this shift, the questions below offer clear, research-based responses to support consistent understanding and communication across our schools.

Answering Questions



1. What is standards-based grading (SBG)?

Standards-based grading (SBG) is an approach to assessing student learning based on proficiency in clearly defined learning objectives rather than an accumulation of points. It provides accurate, meaningful, and actionable feedback to students and families (Guskey, 2011).

2. How is SBG different from traditional grading?

Standards-based grading more accurately measures student learning as compared to traditional grading by focusing on what students know and can do, rather than averaging scores that may include effort, participation, and early struggles. Unlike traditional grading, which can distort understanding with non-academic factors, SBG evaluates proficiency based on a body of evidence aligned to specific learning standards. By prioritizing the most recent and most accurate demonstration of learning, SBG provides a clearer, fairer reflection of student progress and readiness for future learning, college, and career (Link and Guskey, 2022).

3. What research supports SBG?

Studies by Marzano (2006) and Guskey (2015) show that SBG improves student motivation, achievement, and retention by providing clearer expectations and more targeted feedback.

4. How do standards-based grades reflect student learning?

Grades reflect a student's most current level of proficiency in relation to state or district standards. This means final scores are based on demonstrated learning rather than an average of all attempts (Schimmer, 2016).

5. What do the proficiency levels mean?

- **4 – Proficient (P):** Students independently met the learning target related to the standard.
- **3 – Nearing Proficient (NP):** Students demonstrate understanding of most concepts/skills related to the standard.
- **2 – Developing (DEV):** Students demonstrate understanding of simpler concepts/skills related to the standard.
- **1 – Not Yet (NY):** Even with help, students have limited understanding of concepts/skills related to the standard.
- **0 – No Evidence (NE):** There is no demonstrated understanding or insufficient evidence to assess learning at this time.

6. How does SBG impact motivation?

Research shows that traditional grading often discourages learning by emphasizing point collection over proficiency and discourages students from taking risks as they can be penalized for not mastering content shortly after being introduced to new learning. SBG fosters a growth mindset, encouraging students to focus on progress rather than just final scores (Dweck, 2007; Schimmer, 2016).

7. How are assessments used in SBG?

Assessments measure learning rather than rank students. All assessments are utilized as a form of evidence of learning in standards-based grading. Multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning are encouraged (Marzano, 2010).

8. Are students penalized for missing or late work?

Deadlines are still required. We grade what students know while holding them accountable for completion through evidence reporting in the gradebook. “No evidence” is reported in the gradebook with a zero.

9. Can students redo assignments or retake tests?

Yes, opportunities to re-do assignments and retake assessments have been common practice for several years and will continue. Reassessment offers students multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in content, just like employees in today's workforce. We are assessing learning, not the timeline of when students learn. Reassessing without penalty reinforces that understanding and growth are valued more than a one-time snapshot of performance.

10. Does SBG lower academic expectations?

SBG raises expectations by requiring students to demonstrate learning of each standard. SBG does not deflate or inflate grades overall.

11. How does SBG prepare students for college and careers?

SBG aligns with skills valued in higher education and the workforce, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and resilience. Additionally, the process of assessment mirrors the types of certification assessments which many students will experience, allowing multiple attempts to reach the level of proficiency necessary to earn a certification.

12. Do colleges and universities use standards-based grading?

At the university level, very few if any institutions have consistent, system-wide practices in place for grading. Professors are highly autonomous and often highly inconsistent amongst each other as it relates to their practices and approach to grading. However, there are more and more professors and universities that are beginning to implement alternative grading practices such as standards-based grading in their classrooms. With standards-based grading, we are setting our students up for success because in college, they will be expected to learn the content – and their grades will reflect their mastery of the content in the course.

13. How do teachers ensure consistency in grading?

Common proficiency scales, professional learning communities, and calibration exercises help teachers apply standards consistently across classrooms (O'Connor, 2018). The use of proficiency scales in the grading process will assist NKC Schools in being more consistent in our grading practices across schools than ever before.

14. How do families track student progress?

Parents and families can view updated proficiency scores and feedback through the district's K-12 learning management system. Reports emphasize student strengths and areas for improvement.

15. What happens if a student doesn't meet a standard?

Students receive targeted interventions and additional learning opportunities to demonstrate proficiency. Teachers provide ongoing support to close learning gaps.

16. Will this affect my student's GPA and college admissions?

No. Traditional letter grades will still be issued each semester beginning in sixth grade. Additionally, transcripts sent to colleges, universities and employers will look exactly the same as they always have.

17. How can parents support students in a standards-based system?

Encourage a focus on learning over grades, discuss strengths and areas for growth, and support goal-setting based on feedback from teachers. Parents can also access the district proficiency scales that are utilized for determining grades.

18. How does SBG impact student accountability?

SBG increases accountability. It shifts the focus from compliance (e.g., turning in work on time for points) to demonstrating learning. Students are still responsible for completing assignments, but grades reflect learning, not behavior. Work habits and responsibility are reported separately.

19. Does SBG mean students can turn in work whenever they want?

No. While students have opportunities to demonstrate learning over time, deadlines still exist. Teachers provide structured opportunities for reassessment, but students must engage in the process, including completing necessary practice and corrections.

20. Are all assignments graded in an SBG system?

All assignments in a standards-based grading system can be used as evidence for learning and count toward the course grade.

21. Does SBG eliminate homework?

No. Homework is still assigned, and its purpose is to provide practice and reinforce learning. It is used as feedback rather than a direct factor in the final grade unless it serves as valid evidence of proficiency.

22. Why aren't extra credit or bonus points part of SBG?

SBG ensures that grades reflect learning, not effort or extra tasks. Instead of extra credit, students improve their scores by demonstrating higher levels of proficiency through practice and reassessment opportunities. Additionally, extra credit, effort and other behaviors of learning often contribute to grade inflation.

23. How do group projects work in an SBG system?

Grades are assigned based on each student's individual demonstration of learning, rather than a shared group score. Teachers assess students on their contribution and understanding of the standards rather than participation.

24. How are behavioral issues, attendance, and work ethic addressed in SBG?

These factors are addressed separately from academic achievement to ensure grades reflect learning. However, students are still held accountable through behavior reports, school policies, and interventions.

25. What if a student struggles with tests but understands the material?

SBG allows multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding. Teachers may use projects, presentations, discussions, or alternative assessments to measure proficiency.

26. How is a final term or semester grade determined at the secondary level?

All of a student's final standard scores for a course are compiled into an average course grade on a 0-4 point scale.

27. How do retakes and reassessments work?

Students have opportunities to improve their understanding and retake assessments after demonstrating additional learning. However, reassessments are structured, meaning students must complete prerequisite learning activities before retesting.

28. What if a student doesn't take reassessments seriously and just "keeps trying"?

Reassessment is a process, not an unlimited right. To qualify, students must demonstrate they have engaged in meaningful review, completed required practice, or met with their teacher to correct misunderstandings before reassessing.

29. How does SBG ensure fairness for students with different learning needs?

SBG benefits all students by allowing multiple ways to show proficiency, honor that all students learn at different rates, provides clear expectations, and focuses on growth. Differentiation and accommodations are built into assessment practices to support diverse learners.

30. How does SBG affect students in advanced or honors courses?

The proficiency scale remains the same, but advanced courses may include deeper learning opportunities, higher-level applications, and more complex problem-solving. Students are assessed on proficiency in the course's specific standards.

31. How can families help their students in a standards-based system?

- Focus conversations on learning rather than grades.
- Encourage a growth mindset by celebrating progress and effort.
- Use feedback from teachers to help students set learning targets.
- Reinforce the importance of responsibility and time management.
- Access and reinforce the standards taught on the district proficiency scale.

Glossary of Terms

A

Assessment for Learning (AFL): Ongoing assessments used to provide feedback to students and teachers to adjust instruction and improve learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Assessment of Learning (AOL): Summative assessments that evaluate student proficiency at the end of a learning cycle.

Authentic Assessment: Performance-based tasks that require students to demonstrate real-world application of knowledge and skills (Wiggins, 1993).

B

Behavior Reporting: Separating academic achievement from behaviors such as effort, participation, and timeliness in grading practices (Guskey, 2011).

Benchmark Assessment: Periodic assessments used to measure student progress toward proficiency in standards.

C

Competency-Based Education (CBE): A system where students advance upon proficiency rather than time spent in class (Sturgis, 2016).

Criteria-Referenced Grading: Evaluation based on a set of defined learning standards rather than comparison to peers (Marzano, 2006).

Calibration: The process of ensuring consistency in scoring and grading across teachers to maintain reliability in student assessments (Schimmer, 2016).

D

Descriptive Feedback: Specific information given to students to improve learning rather than general praise or criticism (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting teaching methods to meet individual student needs and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2001).

E

Evidence of Learning: Any artifact, assessment, or performance that demonstrates student understanding of a standard (Guskey, 2015).

Essential Standards: The most critical learning targets that students must master to be successful in future coursework (DuFour, 2010).

F

Feedback Loop: An iterative process where students receive guidance on their learning, apply revisions, and improve based on feedback (Hattie, 2009).

Formative Assessment: Ongoing checks for understanding that inform instruction without contributing to final grades (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

G

Growth Mindset: The belief that intelligence and ability can be developed through effort and learning (Dweck, 2007).

Grade Inflation: The practice of assigning higher grades than warranted, which misrepresents student learning (Reeves, 2011).

L

Learning Progression: A roadmap of how students develop understanding over time within a content area (Heritage, 2008).

Learning Targets: Daily or unit-based objectives that describe what students need to know and do (Moss & Brookhart, 2012).

M

Proficiency Learning: An approach where students must reach a certain level of proficiency before moving on to the next skill (Bloom, 1968; Guskey, 2010).

Median Score: In SBG, the middle score of a student's multiple attempts at demonstrating proficiency, often used to represent final proficiency (O'Connor, 2018).

P

Performance Assessment: An evaluation requiring students to demonstrate learning through tasks, projects, or presentations (Wiggins, 1993).

Proficiency Scale: A rubric-based scale (often 0-4) that defines levels of proficiency for a standard (Schimmer, 2016).

R

Reassessment: The opportunity for students to demonstrate improved learning after additional instruction or practice (Schimmer, 2016).

Reliability in Grading: The consistency of grading practices across teachers and assessments to ensure fairness (Marzano, 2006).

S

Standards-Based Grading (SBG): A grading system that measures student proficiency on specific learning standards rather than accumulating points (Guskey & Jung, 2016).

Summative Assessment: An assessment given at the end of a learning period to determine proficiency in content (Marzano, 2006).

T

Traditional Grading: A points-based grading system that often includes averages, extra credit, and non-academic factors (O'Connor, 2018).

Triangulation of Data: Using multiple sources (tests, projects, observations) to determine a student's proficiency level (Schimmer, 2016).

Research & Related Articles

Divided into topics, these links house digital versions of research studies and other articles in the field.

Behavior

- [Attendance](#) - O'Connor
- [Behavior \(How to Grade for Learning\)](#) - O'Connor
- [Cheating](#) - O'Connor
- [Effort, Participation and Attitude](#) - O'Connor
- [Grading and Motivation](#) - Guskey
- [Grading Behavior](#) - Guskey
- [Grading Behavior](#) - O'Connor
- [Grading Effort, Attendance and Behavior](#) - Wormeli
- [What's in a Grade](#) - Scott

Determining Proficiency

- [Multiple Opportunities \(Retakes\)](#) - O'Connor
- [Multiple Opportunities \(Retakes\)](#) - Wormeli
- [Multiple Opportunities \(Redos & Retakes Done Right\)](#) - Wormeli

Extra Credit

- [Extra Credit](#) - Wormeli
- [Extra Credit](#) - O'Connor

Formative & Summative Assessment

- [Best Practice in Assessment](#) - Zemelman
- [Maximizing the Power of Formative Assessments](#) - Stiggins & DuFour
- [Formative Assessment](#) - Heritage
- [Formative Assessment](#) - Brookhart
- [The Best Value in Formative Assessment](#) - Chappuis & Chappuis
- [What a Difference a Word Makes](#) - Stiggins & Chappuis

Group Work

- [Group Grades](#) - O'Connor
- [Group Grading](#) - Wormeli
- [Group Scores](#) - O'Connor

Incomplete & Late Work

- [Grading Late Work](#) - Wormeli
- [Incomplete and Late Work](#) - Guskey
- [Late Work \(How to Grade for Learning\)](#) - O'Connor
- [Late Work](#) - O'Connor
- [Late Work 2](#) - O'Connor

Standards-Based Systems

- [A's For Good Behavior](#) - Tyre
- [Basing Grades on Standards](#) - O'Connor
- [Grading in a SBS](#) - Colby
- [Reconcilable Differences](#) - Tomlinson
- [7 Reasons for Standards Based Grading](#) - Scriffiny

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

- [A Century of Grading Research](#) – Brookhart, Guskey, Bowers & McMillan
- [The Case Against Percentage Grades](#) – Guskey
- [Standards-Based Grading and Reporting Will Improve Education](#) – Muñoz & Guskey

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