

thinkpoint

Grading and competency-based education

Introduction: Problems with grading and the grading system

Everyone is familiar with grading and the importance of earning a high mark. Grades are the rewards of schooling, the blunt summary symbols of what a student has achieved. Sometimes the grades students earn reflect authentic achievement and disciplinary mastery. At other times, grades are only loosely connected with learning because they reflect students' work completion, behavior, or relative standing in the class (Bonner & Chen, 2019). In other words, grades are often an uncertain symbol of achievement because they are inconsistent and incoherent both within and across classrooms. One can imagine, for instance, two students in the same class who both received As. One student consistently demonstrated mastery of academic content and the other constructed an

It may make sense to teachers to offer students several pathways through which they can succeed in school by earning high grades. However, this temptation limits learning and undermines actual student achievement. After all, some students would rather

The similarities and differences of competency-based education and standards-based grading

CBE principles require that the grades students earn reflect evidence of

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construct their grade through non-academic means, if available, rather than engaging in the considerable effort required to learn academic content well. For their part, teachers may choose to consider non-academic

factors because they want to see students do well, but they are unsure how to secure high levels of learning for all students.

This Think Point considers the principles of grading within competency-based education (CBE) models as a means through which teachers can establish the dual goal of securing success for all students (as evidenced

in high grades) while also strictly aligning grades with achievement.

their academic achievement alone (Colby, 2020; Gagnon, 2022, Hess et al., 2020). CBE principles also demand student flexibility, ambitious and well-articulated competencies, engagement in authentic tasks important to the discipline, transparent criteria against which work will be evaluated, and multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery (Gagnon, 2022). Notably, competency-based education and standards-based grading embrace a similar philosophy and approach to capturing student achievement including a focus on mastery of essential disciplinary content standards and using assessment as the foundation for self, peer, and teacher feedback and teaching and learning decisions (Townsend, 2014; Welsh, 2019).

However, there are also some potential differences. While CBE requires students to advance through academic content in step with their demonstrated mastery, extends



A through other means like showing up on time, completing tasks, and turning in extra credit.

learning beyond the classroom walls, and relies on authentic assessments, standards-based grading typically does not make these demands non-negotiable (Townsend, 2014). Furthermore, while CBE demands performance assessment, standards-based grading does not make this expectation explicit.

The relative importance of performance assessment in CBE can best be explained by considering the difference between a competency and a standard. A content

standard outlines the specific academic skill or material a student must learn within a discipline and typically within a single course. A competency is a broad and transferrable skill that students apply to a variety of situations across disciplines. Importantly, content standards within a discipline are essential and tangible elements of fostering the broader competency. Specifically, the performance assessments teachers employ to gauge how well students are able to transfer their skills to novel situations across disciplines will be couched in authentic disciplinary tasks. Thus, while competencies and content standards are distinct, with a CBE framework teachers will use content standards to foster development of broader competencies.

Suggestions for grading with a CBE framework

The seven suggestions that follow are designed to provide guidance to educators who would like to make grading more meaningful by attaching them to the CBE principles.

Teachers should work together to develop performance assessments that embody the larger goals of the competency but also focus students on tasks consistent with the disciplinary standards.

Suggestion 1: *Establish a set of fundamental competencies, and integrate content standards to support the development of these competencies.*

Educators should be thinking about the broader set of competencies that students must attain. These competencies then become the fundamental skills, abilities, and habits of mind for all students. Hess, Colby, and Joseph (2020) argue that competencies should include both academic and personal success skills. Personal success skills might involve explaining thinking well, responding to feedback about learning, self- and peer assessing, collaborating well with others, and exhibiting pro-social behaviors. In grade level and content area teams, teachers can then work on how key content and learning activities will support the development of both academic and personal success competencies.

Suggestion 2: *Work with colleagues to develop a set of learning experiences and performance assessments that reflect important disciplinary learning and personal*

success skills that support the development of essential competencies.

As noted above, standards and competencies are distinct in that standards detail specific academic content within a discipline while com-

petencies describe academic skills and abilities across disciplines. While competencies and standards are distinct, they should nevertheless work in tandem. In other words, standards help focus competencies within a discipline. The link

between competencies and standards is critical because performance assessments require students to engage in subject-specific academic work and this requires specificity and focus that a competency, by itself, cannot provide. Rather, teachers should work together to develop performance assessments that embody the larger goals of the competency but also focus students on tasks consistent with the disciplinary standards. This might require students to create, analyze, critique, or construct. Importantly, when the learning experiences and performance assessments are situated in the formative assessment process, many of the personal success competencies are likely to become manifest. For instance, if personal success competencies include skills like clearly explaining one's thinking, assessing self and peers, reflecting on feedback in reference to learning goals, and taking actionable steps to improve learning, they will be closely connected to the formative assessment process.

Suggestion 3: *Craft standards of performance that capture essential features of mastery.*

In addition to rich and robust performance assessments that align with disciplinary practices, teachers will need ways to make sense of evidence



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of student achievement, document and describe this evidence, and communicate their assessment of student proficiency back to the students themselves. The most fruitful way to do this is to craft high-quality rubrics that capture the essential features of mastery for both academic and personal competencies and place mastery on a continuum from novice to expert, along with examples of quality student evidence so students can operationalize the rubrics while learning. In grading practices that reflect CBE principles, teachers will be doing far less grading, as they will not be scoring evidence of student understanding while that understanding is still in progress. In other words, only ultimate mastery matters and teachers should not grade student work as they are working toward mastery. In fact, premature grading actually obscures eventual student performance and divorces grades from academic accomplishment.

Suggestion 4: *Provide opportunities for students to work toward and demonstrate their mastery while engaged in the authentic work of the discipline.*

Consistent with the CBE approach, teachers should provide students with the opportunity to write, construct, explore, experiment, and demonstrate in ways consistent with high standards of disciplinary learning. Engaging students in these opportunities should surface students' emerging mastery of disciplinary content, their progress in broader academic

competencies, and their personal success skills. Again, many of these learning experiences will occur in the process of obtaining mastery of the standard and the broader competency; teachers should provide students with formative feedback couched in the progression of mastery detailed in rubrics. The continual feedback loop that includes eliciting evidence of student understanding, providing formative feedback, and making teaching and learning decisions is critical. When teachers have determined that students are well prepared, they should then administer a performance assessment.

Suggestion 5: *Work together to collaboratively score performance assessments.*

Even with clear competencies and standards and well-articulated rubrics that describe student mastery, performance assessments may be difficult to score, and teachers may have trouble providing formative feedback that students can use to take the next steps in their learning. For this reason, teachers should consider working together with grade-level or content-alike colleagues to score performance

assessments and craft feedback to students based on evidence of their learning. Collaborative scoring will also allow teachers to co-construct a shared set of expectations for high-quality achievement and will help them formulate the kind of feedback that students can use.

Suggestion 6: *Continue to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning until they have reached mastery*

Students will likely need multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of specific standards and broader competencies, and they will probably differ in the number of these opportunities they require. Rather than being a summative assessment that must be graded, performance assessments can be yet another educative experience that propels students on their



learning journey. In fact, performance assessments are the key way for students to provide evidence that they have mastered a competency and are ready for what's next. Teachers should forego grading for as long as possible, preferably until students have demonstrated high levels of learning.

Suggestion 7: *Establish a plan for reporting student progress based on evidence of their learning*

Even in CBE contexts, grading cannot be pushed off forever. Ideally, report cards would reflect the fundamental academic and personal mastery levels in which teachers would report student progress for each competency (e.g., advanced, proficient, approaching proficient, developing). In other contexts, teachers will be required to assign traditional letter grades for each course or subject. Even in such situations, there are ways to honor CBE principles. For instance, content area and grade-alike teachers can work together to write descriptions of what each assigned grade “means” in terms of competency mastery. Teachers can couch these definitions in terms of standards of proficiency used to collaboratively score performance assessments (e.g., advanced, proficient,



basic, emerging). Teachers can then collectively ask questions including for how many competencies will a student have to demonstrate advanced mastery in order to earn an A? If teachers decide, for example, that a student must have advanced mastery for more than half the competencies and must be proficient in the rest, this would comprise the collective understanding among teachers, students, and parents about what an A means.

Conclusion

In traditional educational settings, many routes lead to high grades. Competency-based education models, however, demand that grades

be tied to high levels of academic achievement alone. Fortunately, CBE principles provide insight into how the seemingly impossible goal of universally high achievement can be accomplished. Importantly, CBE calls for less grading as teachers will be basing grades on ultimate achievement rather than an average of effort and emerging evidence collected along the way. Teachers can promote both high levels of learning and high grades for all students when they:

- work together to establish a set of competencies and focal standards,
- develop educative experiences

Reflection Points

- 1** The author claims that traditional grading offers several routes to earning a high mark, but that—while appealing—this approach limits learning. How does the author suggest that traditional grading potentially suppresses learning? Do you agree with this point? Why or why not?
- 2** What similarities does the author suggest that standards-based grading and competency-based grading share? How do they differ?
- 3** The author offers seven suggestions for educators to consider if they wish to transform the grading practices in their schools to align with the principles of competency-based education. Which suggestions resonate most strongly with you? Which suggestions challenge your thinking? Which suggestions would you change?
- 4** As you read through the suggestions, reflect on where your school is now in enacting the practices that the author suggests. What might your next step be? How can you use the suggestions and your answers from question three to develop a plan to make competency-based grading a reality in your school.

including performance assessments,

- construct rubrics,
- provide ample learning opportunities,
- administer performance assessments and score these performance assessments collaboratively,
- provide formative feedback, and
- give students ample opportunity to act in response to their emerging evidence of their learning.



Author bio

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To learn more

The Michigan Assessment Consortium website offers a curated collection of sharable resources that show how assessment literate practice can support implementation of a competency-based education model.

Explore these resources, then spread the word!

www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/assessment-resources/competency-based-education/



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