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# SCHOOL LEADER'S

*guide to*

# STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

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## Prioritized Standards and Proficiency Scales



The first step in implementing standards-based grading is to clearly identify and articulate what students need to know and be able to do as a result of schooling. Those elements of knowledge and skill are usually articulated in standards. Often, however, there are more standards than can be taught in the instructional time available. Additionally, while standards usually articulate a target element of knowledge or skill, they do not always specify the simpler learning that students will need to acquire on their way to mastering the target. To address these issues, school leaders and administrators can help teacher teams prioritize standards and create proficiency scales.

Prioritized standards and proficiency scales clearly articulate what students should know and be able to do as a result of schooling. In many cases, individual teachers identify prioritized standards and create proficiency scales on their own to use in their classrooms. When teams of teachers use the same prioritized standards and proficiency scales, however, consistency from teacher to teacher and school to school increases. This consistency makes any differences in student achievement less dependent on which teacher a student is assigned and more reliably matched to the actual performance of that student on the criteria for a specific prioritized standard. Thus, we strongly recommend that administrators lead teams of teachers to collaboratively identify prioritized standards and create proficiency scales for those standards. Doing so requires input from teachers, of course. Here we present a process that leaders can use to identify teachers to participate in the process, help teachers prioritize standards, and help teachers write proficiency scales for the prioritized standards.

### Identify Teachers

Prioritizing standards and creating proficiency scales requires content knowledge and teaching experience; thus it is essential for school leaders and administrators to create teams of teachers to complete this work. Ideally, this is a district committee. However, if a principal wanted to do this only at his or her site, it could be a school committee. Each grade level to which a given content area applies should be represented. For English

To begin the prioritization process, leaders first help teachers by explaining criteria that should be considered when evaluating standards to decide if they should be prioritized or not. Second, leaders allocate time and space for the work to happen. Finally, leaders use a four-step process to help teachers navigate the actual prioritization of the standards.

## Criteria for Prioritized Standards

Before teams begin to identify prioritized standards, they must understand the criteria for determining which standards should be prioritized. According to Larry Ainsworth (2003), there are three criteria to consider when determining which standards to prioritize:

1. **Endurance**—Knowledge and skills that will last beyond a class period or course
2. **Leverage**—Knowledge and skills that cross over into many domains of learning
3. **Readiness**—Knowledge and skills important to subsequent content or courses

Our experience has indicated that two additional criteria should also be considered:

4. **Teacher judgment**—Knowledge of content area and ability to identify more- and less-important content
5. **Assessment**—Student opportunity to learn content that will be assessed

As an example of how teachers can evaluate a specific standard for these five criteria, consider the following ELA standard from the CCSS:

Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears. (RI.4.7; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010a, p. 14)

This standard demonstrates endurance, leverage, and readiness—students will use these skills long after the test, in multiple disciplines, and in other content areas or courses. It also has strong teacher judgment and assessment connections. In contrast, consider a Common Core standard related to speaking and listening:

Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes. (SL.4.5; NGA & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 24)

While this standard may have some measure of endurance and leverage, it contains fewer readiness skills than the first standard. When asked to use their judgment, many teachers indicate that SL.4.5 should be a subordinate standard that is connected to and taught in

The A begins at 3.0 because a score of 3.0 indicates that a student has demonstrated understanding of all content in a target learning goal with no major errors or omissions. This makes some intuitive sense—if a student's average score indicates that he or she knows everything that was taught for the target learning goals, he or she should receive an A. (p. 106)

The goal of educators is to have all students reach proficiency; thus, proficient students should earn an A. In the following story, a teacher shares differences he noticed when he helped his students focus on learning instead of point grabbing.

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When Jeff Flygare aligned his students' grades with his proficiency scales, he saw a change in student attitudes. Rather than having students come in to discuss ways to get more points before the end of the semester, his students began to ask, "How do I become a better writer?" and "How do I analyze literature better?" The key difference between these comments and the previous point grabbing was that students were clear about their strengths and weaknesses. Because their grades were directly tied to a proficiency scale, they knew what they needed to do to get better. Instead of doing extra credit to enhance their average score for the semester, students became interested in demonstrating higher levels of proficiency on the prioritized standards.

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## Separating Knowledge and Behavior

As noted previously, in traditional grading systems, nonacademic skills such as effort, attendance, participation, punctuality, and ability to meet deadlines are typically incorporated into academic grades. For example, a teacher might tell students that 5 or 10 percent of their final grade will be based on their attendance and participation in class.

Secondary teachers, more so than primary teachers (Guskey, 2009a), tend to use several major projects or exams to compute a grade in addition to combining nonacademic factors with academic ones, such as averaging scores for each of the following items:

Attendance	Homework quality	Punctuality of assignment submissions
Class behavior or attitude	Journal entries	Reports or projects
Class participation	Laboratory projects	Student portfolios
Class quizzes	Major exams	Work habits and neatness
Classroom observations	Oral presentations	
Homework completion		

Assigning a failing grade to a student who has not met course or grade-level requirements because of a disability or difficulty with the language seems inherently unfair—especially if the student has worked hard, turned in assignments on time, and done what the teacher asked. (p. 31)

Well-developed proficiency scales can guide teachers' decisions regarding the level of support they need to provide exceptional students as well as how to grade them. Levels of support are closely associated with response to intervention (RTI), a system that provides differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students so they achieve higher levels of academic and behavioral success (Campbell, Wang, & Algozzine, 2010; Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

A classroom will likely include students who fall in the three levels shown in figure 5.1. The majority of students will be able to use the general education proficiency scales (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). However, some students will require accommodations or modifications to be made to proficiency scales. *Accommodations* are supports put in place to help students achieve grade-level expectations. They do not change the level of the expectations for students, whereas modifications do. *Modifications* shift the expectations either up or down from the grade-level expectancies.

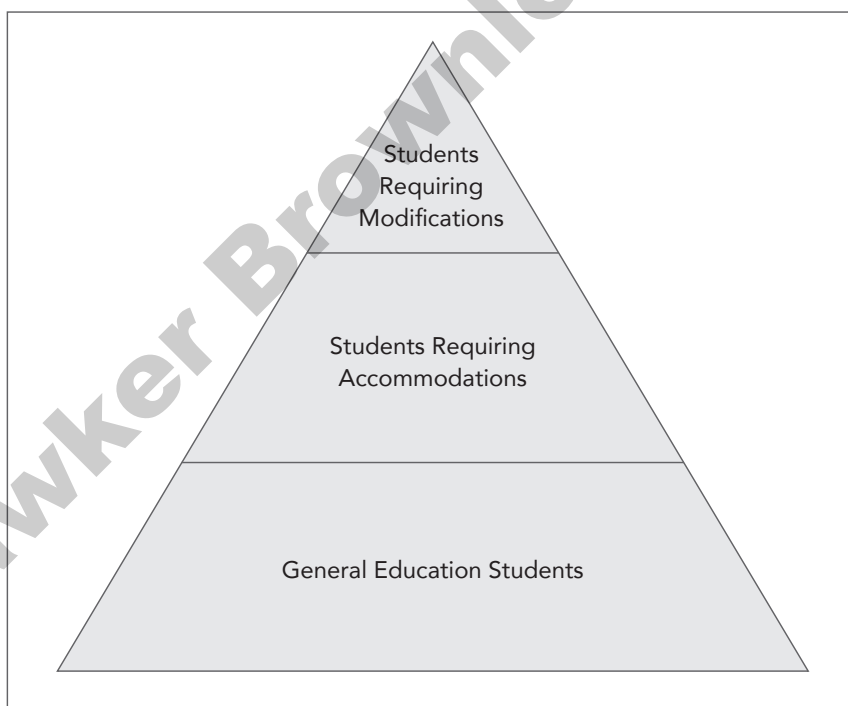


Figure 5.1: Levels of support.

<p>Please respond to the following questions about grading. Candid responses are critical and honored as we work toward a common grading system.</p>
<p>What is the definition of a grade?</p>
<p>Why do we grade?</p>
<p>What should a grade represent?</p>
<p>What role should homework, attendance, behavior, and participation play in grading?</p>
<p>What role should retesting play in grading?</p>
<p>Is grading fair and equitable in your classes? Why?</p>

Figure 6.3: Grading survey.

To facilitate the administration of surveys and compilation of results, leaders can use anonymous electronic survey tools such as SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) or Zoomerang ([www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com)).

After all staff members have completed a survey, small groups of teachers can discuss survey answers to discover common beliefs and concerns about current grading practices. Data from a grading survey can be a starting point for guiding team conversations or discussions with parents. Data can also help leaders determine what types of professional development are most beneficial as implementation progresses.

### Establish a Group of Scouts

In addition to assembling a guiding team, leaders may also want to establish a group of scouts. Scouts are staff members who explore the challenges ahead and investigate what is to come. Often, this involves visiting schools who have successfully implemented standards-based grading and reporting back about what they observed. Scouts do not necessarily need to be on the guiding team, but they do need to be carefully selected to represent various teacher groups in a school, including teachers who are ready for the