

### What is standards-based grading?

Standards-based grading "involves measuring students' proficiency on well-defined course objectives." (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). (Note: *Standards-based reporting* involves reporting these course objectives rather than letter grades at the end of each grading/reporting period.) The visual below compares traditional grading with standards-based grading practices.

Traditional Grading System	Standards-Based Grading System
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, homework, projects, etc.). One grade/entry is given per assessment.</li><li>2. Assessments are based on a percentage system. Criteria for success may be unclear.</li><li>3. Use an uncertain mix of assessment, achievement, effort and behavior to determine the final grade. May use late penalties and extra credit.</li><li>4. Everything goes in the grade book - regardless of purpose.</li><li>5. Include every score, regardless of when it was collected. Assessments record the average - not the best - work.</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Based on learning goals and performance standards. One grade/entry is given per learning goal.</li><li>2. Standards are criterion or proficiency-based. Criteria and targets are made available to students ahead of time.</li><li>3. Measures achievement only OR separates achievement from effort/behavior. No penalties or extra credit given.</li><li>4. Selected assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, etc.) are used for grading purposes.</li><li>5. Emphasize the most recent evidence of learning when grading.</li></ol>

Adapted from O'Connor K (2002). *How to Grade for Learning: Linking grades to standards (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

### What is competency-based education?

"Under a competency-based education system, students advance to the next level based on their mastery of content rather than their age or seat time." ([Iowa Department of Education](#))

Principles of competency-based education (from Guidelines for PK-12 Competency-based Pathways ([pdf](#))):

#### A. Students Advance upon Mastery

- Students advance to higher-level work upon demonstration of mastery of standards rather than according to age or seat time.
- Students are evaluated on performance and application.
- Students will master standards and earn credit or advance in content at their own pace.
- They will work through some standards more rapidly while taking more time to ensure mastery on others.

#### B. Explicit and Measurable Learning Objectives that Empower Students

- The relationship between student and teacher is fundamentally changed as students gain understanding of what working with standards requires and take ownership of learning and teachers provide the appropriate supports for learning.
- The unit of learning becomes modular.
- Learning expands beyond the classroom.

#### C. Assessment Is Meaningful and a Positive Learning Experience for Students

- Schools embrace a strong emphasis on formative assessment as the unit of learning becomes modular.
- Teachers collaborate to develop understanding of what is an adequate demonstration of proficiency.
- Teachers assess skills or concepts in multiple contexts and multiple ways.
- Attention is on student learning, not student grades.
- Summative assessments are adaptive and timely.
- Assessment rubrics are explicit in what students must be able to know and do to progress to the next level of study.

- Examples of student work that demonstrate skills development throughout a learning continuum help students understand their own progress.

#### **D. Rapid, Differentiated Support for Students Who Fall Behind or Become Disengaged**

- Educator capacity, and students' own capacity to seek out help, will be enhanced by technology-enabled solutions that incorporate predictive analytic tools.
- Pacing matters. Although students will progress at their own speeds, students who are proceeding more slowly will need more help, and educators must provide high quality interventions.

#### **E. Learning Outcomes Emphasize Application and Creation of Knowledge**

- Competencies will include the standards, concepts, and skills of the Iowa Core as well as the universal constructs (creativity, complex communication, collaboration, critical thinking, flexibility and adaptability, and productivity and accountability).
- Lifelong learning skills are designed around students needs, life experiences, and the skills needed for them to be ready for college, career, and citizenry.
- Expanded learning opportunities are created as opportunities for students to develop and apply skills as they are earning credit.

#### **What are some ways in which standards-based grading and competency-based education are similar?**

- Both focus on student learnings specific standards based on a pre-determined rubric.
- Students take more ownership of their learning, because it (learning) is communicated rather than "Project 3" or "Worksheet 4-2."
- Using assessments in formative ways is the norm rather than exception.
- Learning outcomes *could* emphasize application and creation of knowledge in a classroom that uses a standards-based grading philosophy, but by definition this does not need to be in place.
- Similarly, experiences *could* be designed around students needs and life experiences in a standards-based grading classroom, but it is not necessarily the norm.

#### **What are some ways in which standards-based grading and competency-based education are different?**

- In a competency-based system, students advance to higher level work and can earn credit at their own pace. In a building, district or classroom using a standards-based grading philosophy, this is not necessarily the case. Students are likely required to complete x number of hours of seat time in order to earn credit for the course.
- Learning expands beyond the classroom. This may or may not take place in a standards-based grading philosophy. In a competency-based system, a student who learns a lot about wood working over the summer may earn credit when he or she returns to school the next year. Similarly, students are encouraged to learn outside the classroom so that they can demonstrate competencies at their own, rapid rate.
- Teachers assess skills or concepts in multiple contexts and multiple ways. This may or may not be the case in a standards-based grading classroom, however it is a non-negotiable in competency-based education.

#### **Summary**

A standards-based grading (SBG) philosophy is similar, but not synonymous with the idea of competency-based education (CBE). SBG is a way of thinking about grading and assessment that more clearly communicates with parents and students how well learners currently understand the course objectives/standards/competencies. CBE is a system in which students move from one level of learning to the next based on their understanding of pre-determined competencies/standards/objectives without regard to seat time, days or hours. A competency-based system *may* utilize a standards-based report card to communicate student learning, however the two educational terms are not, by definition, the same.