

Grading For Learning FAQ's

What is the purpose of grading?

Effective grading practices should provide accurate, meaningful, and consistent communication to a student and parent about what a student knows and is able to do as a result of their school experiences. The foundation of effective grading practices is based on providing specific feedback describing both where students currently are in the learning process as well identifying the next steps required in their learning.

What is Grading for Learning?

Grading for Learning is a model that is reflective of standards-based grading, which aligns grades to established benchmarks. In this model, students and teachers are held accountable for the essential learning defined in benchmarks regardless of what school or classroom a student might be in or what teacher a student might have. Grading for Learning is associated with the work of international education researcher, Ken O'Connor.

Why are we working to improve our grading practices?

The intent of the Grading for Learning initiative is to provide accurate, meaningful and consistent communication to students and parents about student learning. Additionally, our intention is to engage in best practices, which are supported by years of educational research. This research has shown that when Grading for Learning is done with fidelity, it is one of the highest leverage strategies for improving student achievement.

The ultimate goal of Grading for Learning is to provide grades that are:

Accurate: Basing a student's grade on assessments *of* learning, allows the teacher to create a clear picture of what the student has learned without the influence of other, non-academic factors. These other factors, such as effort and behavior, are still essential, but are not part of the student's academic grade and are communicated separately.

Consistent: For each outcome, the teacher provides a proficiency scale that describes exactly what the student should know or be able to do. Proficiency scales identify criterion for proficiency and are used consistently throughout the unit and semester.

Meaningful: A meaningful grade is one that clearly communicates the learning that has taken place. In a grading for learning classroom, scores are recorded by the learning outcomes rather than by categories, such as tests or homework. This makes it easier to identify areas of strength and areas of growth.

More support for ongoing learning: Grading for learning supports student learning by focusing on demonstrated proficiency and enrichment and intervention as needed. The reassessment policy supports student learning by allowing new levels of learning to replace old when a student demonstrates improvement on an assessment.

What is different as a result of the implementation the Grading for Learning model?

1. Grades are not based on the percent of material a student has mastered but rather on demonstrated mastery of the established benchmarks.
2. Homework is viewed as an opportunity for students to practice their learning independently without being penalized with a grade.
3. Grades are an accurate reflection of benchmark mastery because instead of using extra credit to "boost" a grade, students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning as their knowledge grows and their skills improve. Additionally, they do not include academic behaviors such as effort, responsibility, and respect.
4. Zeros are not an acceptable grade to motivate students to learn. Instead students are encouraged to complete their required work because it is essential to mastery of the benchmarks.
5. Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning prior to being graded.

What is it that students have to master?

Students need to master local grade-level or course benchmarks (or standards) that have been collaboratively determined by McFarland School District teachers. State and national standards documents are used as resources to shape our local essential learning outcomes. *Mastery* implies that students will have multiple opportunities throughout the school year to demonstrate that they are learning the skills and knowledge expressed in the learning outcomes. Therefore, it is not expected that a student is able to master all of the benchmarks early in a learning period; rather, a student is given the necessary time and support to develop mastery of the benchmarks before being assessed.

How will grades be determined?

Students will be assessed on a set of course standards throughout the grading period. Each assessment will be used as evidence to determine the student's current level of mastery in each standard on a 1-4 scale, with instructors looking for trends that show a growth in understanding and ability. In general, the most recent piece of evidence will carry more weight. At the end of each reporting period, instructors will assess the current level of mastery students have demonstrated on each standard and compute an average which will determine the overall grade in the class.

How will this change in grading philosophy impact my child's experience in the classroom?

Students will understand what they are expected to learn, and they will receive regular feedback on the progress of their learning in regard to the established benchmarks. In the past, typically teachers taught material, gave a test, and then assigned a grade. In the Grading for Learning model the teacher determines what needs to be taught in regard to the outcomes, teaches, assesses informally, reteaches and re-assesses informally until there is evidence that the student is prepared to be *formally* assessed (graded).

How does allowing students to retake tests and redo work prepare them for the rigors of college?

Research studies report that nationwide 25-35% of freshman dropout the first semester of college. Using a model that requires students to demonstrate mastery of the essential benchmarks ensures that students have the knowledge, understanding, and skills needed to succeed in college. In addition, redos and retakes hold students accountable for learning rather than excuse them from learning. When students do not achieve mastery and we do not allow them opportunities to relearn that material, we are setting them up for failure. It should also be noted that not all relearning requires a redo or a retake; some courses may revisit benchmarks in a later unit of study and at that point allow students a new opportunity to demonstrate mastery.

Where is the best place to go to learn more about the grading initiative?

Classroom teachers, building administrators, and district administrators are resources for learning about grading reform. Nationally renowned experts in the field who are shaping our work are Rick Wormeli, Robert Marzano, Ken O'Connor, Myron Dueck, and Richard Dufour.

How will this grading model influence student's GPAs (Grade Point Averages)?

The use of an equal interval scale (i.e., a 1-4 scale) instead of percentages will not influence reporting of semester grades, and therefore, will not impact GPAs. Numerical scores (4-0) reflect what a student knows and is able to do based on grade level or course benchmarks. The 4-0 numbers are then correlated to a letter grade. These letter grades are then used to calculate a GPA as in the past.

What other districts are implementing a grading for learning model?

Standards-based grading is prevalent throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Some neighboring school districts that are involved in grading reform are Waukesha, Poynette, Pewaukee, DeForest, Oregon, Grafton, Kettle Moraine, Hartford Union, Menomonee Falls, Milwaukee Public Schools, Franklin, and Sun Prairie to name just a few. Many of these school districts

have websites that the public may access to learn more about their implementation. We have worked collaboratively with many of these districts to learn collegially about how to best implement grading reform. Grading reform and standards-based grading models are also prevalent throughout the state and at the national level.

How will the new grading initiative impact college acceptance?

College admission offices, including UW-Madison, have assured us that McFarland students are definitely not at a disadvantage because of grading for learning. Admissions staff are equipped to review multiple types of grading scales/models FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD and one is not valued more than another. Admissions staff review students in the the context of their school with the available information each college has on the school's curriculum. We provide each school with detailed information on our school profile. Admissions staff have recently seen a number of schools making the exact shift that McFarland is going through, and it has not had an effect on the review process for those students.

Because the new grading reform will have no impact on GPAs and high school transcripts, there will be no impact on college acceptance. It could be argued that since grades will be representative of what a student has mastered, students will be better prepared for the rigor of college entrance exams and coursework. It should also be noted that colleges have always had their own criteria for admission that is rarely a mirror reflection of how any one high school determines or reports grades. The typical college admission criteria for Wisconsin universities include the rigor of coursework, GPA, and ACT or SAT performance. Because colleges and universities recalculate GPAs based on their own criteria and preferences, it is always advisable for parents and students to know the specific criteria for colleges and universities that they are considering. Middle and high school counselors are a valuable resource in understanding post-secondary school admission requirements.

College admissions offices treat all grades as welcome indicators of high school performance while implicitly acknowledging that every school has a unique perspective, student body, and system.