



# A Progression of Grading Reform

Moving from Traditional  
to Competency-Based  
Grading and Beyond

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**Do the grading and assessment practices we use in our classrooms adequately prepare our students for the future?**



**F**or some students, the future may seem bleak. The world is changing rapidly and is becoming a more complicated place. Andy Hargreaves (2024) writes about the “big five” global problems that students will face in their future, which includes continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, weakening democratic structures, increasing racism, and the increase in conflicts that result in war. Further, in the midst of this uncertainty and turmoil, rapid technological changes (especially generative artificial intelligence) are causing notions of what it means to be “knowledgeable” and “skilled” to become ambiguous and uncertain.

Schools are meant to serve students by preparing them for their future, leading to a sense of hope and optimism about their potential for success. In most school jurisdictions, this has involved delivering and assessing a very tightly prescribed curriculum across subject areas, which has been articulated as lists of numerous academic standards over the past couple of decades. However, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that simply achieving the academic standards alone will sufficiently prepare students to face the challenges that the upcoming years and decades may bring. Instead, schools need more than ever to empower students to creatively and strategically apply their knowledge and skills in their homes, communities, nations, and abroad in order to effectively address these problems and create a better future—both for themselves and our society.



To achieve this, teaching and learning approaches must change to allow students opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in other contexts, including some they've never encountered before. With this idea in mind, we must ask ourselves, *Do the grading and assessment practices we use in our classrooms adequately prepare our students for such a future?*

Unfortunately, in many schools, these practices may do more limiting of students' risk-taking and learning application than empowering. Such limitations from traditional practices of grading and assessment warrant a closer examination to uncover underlying problems and potential solutions.

## A Vision for Grading and Assessment

The best grading and assessment practices that encourage authentic learning reflect an understanding that grades are simply symbols intended to communicate student learning and not, as they are used in many places, tools for punishing and rewarding or ranking and sorting. To best communicate student learning within and across classrooms in a school, teachers and school leaders ensure that learning is aligned to prioritized standards and core competencies within a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Brookhart, 2024; Marzano, 2003; Townsley & Wear, 2020; Vander Els & Stack, 2022). Further, assessment is meant to be a meaningful and positive experience for students, used to measure and advance students'

learning—and also an opportunity for students to showcase their learning. Effective formative assessment is used frequently to track learning for feedback purposes and instructional decision-making within a learning progression (William, 2017), while summative assessment is used to measure student learning at the end of a learning progression (Guskey, 2015). While both assessment types are crucial for student learning, they occur at different points in the learning progression, and only summative measures of learning are intended for report card grades. But because such uses of grading and assessment greatly vary from traditional practices, they must be clearly communicated to students and parents for effective implementation (Guskey, 2024; Schimmer et al., 2018).

One significant obstacle to attaining a vision described above is the tradition of autonomy that teachers enjoy over their classroom grading and assessment practices. Indeed, teachers have a high impact on learning when they determine and implement a progression that starts with planning for learning, facilitating learning opportunities, evaluating the learning, and reporting to parents/guardians (Hattie, 2023). However, to face the changing demands of the world we live in, at least two things need to change. First, educators need to embrace the notion of teacher collective efficacy to collaboratively create learning environments across all classrooms that support improved practices (Bloomberg & Pitchford, 2023; Donihoo, 2017; Hattie, 2023). Second, and perhaps more importantly, students need more active participation in grading and as-

**Competency-based grading and assessment allows for increased participation and engagement of students in ways that allow learning to be applied usefully in new or unknown situations.**

essment processes so they have a greater sense of ownership and agency over their learning.

### ***Competency-Based Grading and Assessment***

Competency-based learning, along with the specific practices of competency-based grading and assessment (CBG+), allows for increased participation and engagement of students in ways that allow learning to be applied usefully in new or unknown situations. CBG+ is a set of practices that can help all students to become self-efficacious and self-empowered learners—in other words, learners with a strong sense of agency about their learning. That is to say, it can help them become learners who are able to confidently demonstrate competence as they apply their knowledge and skills to meet the challenges they face in uncertain or ambiguous contexts. Further, self-efficacious and self-empowered learners are those who have developed dis-

positions and strategies to deploy when they determine their current knowledge and skills are inadequate to meet the demands they face in any context in their lives. This requires that these behaviors are explicitly modeled, taught, assessed, and communicated separately from priority academic standards and core competencies.

This paper presents a progression of grading and assessment practices leading to competency-based grading and assessment. The progression explains multiple “points of entry” for individual teachers, schools, or districts that seek to reform their grading and assessment practices to better develop students into self-efficacious and self-empowered learners. In this progression, grading and assessment practices exist on a continuum starting from *traditional*, which are primarily aligned to serving systemic needs, and ending with *competency-based*, which are focused on developing and fostering each individual learner’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Between these starting and ending points are *foundational*, *transitional*, and *standards-based grading* stages, which serve as steps along the way to the path toward the desired destination of CBG+.



## ***Addressing Problems of Traditional Grading***

Readers may have been drawn to this paper because they are dissatisfied with the current grading and assessment practices employed in their classroom, school, or system—especially if they feel stuck with long-standing and inflexible traditional grading practices. The shortcomings of traditional grading practices are well-documented (Brookhart et al., 2016). Problems include their lack of accuracy, objectivity, and equity, to name a few (Brookhart, 2024; Guskey, 2015; Feldman, 2024; Kunnath, 2017; O’Connor, 2022). Traditional practices are often used as systemic mechanisms of ranking and sorting students or as motivational tools to address desired or undesired behaviors. Such methods lack direct connections to student learning, which can ultimately lead to a high-stakes environment with negative implications, such as reduced peer collaboration, low risk-taking and experimentation, and limited achievement gains (Feldman, 2024; Guskey, 2015). Further, in a time when many educational reform efforts are aimed at increasing equity, traditional grading practices are well-known to maintain and perpetuate inequities (Feldman, 2024).

As a response to the inequities of traditional grading practices, many teachers and administrators are moving toward *standards-based grading* (SBG), which is one critical element of standards-based learning. Thomas Guskey describes standards-based learning (SBL) as a system that explicitly ensures “transparency in all elements of the teaching and learning



process: curriculum, assessment, and grading and reporting” (Guskey, 2020, p. 22). SBL, in a nutshell, is an educational process in which all learning and assessment activities are aligned to clearly defined learning standards with well-defined (or illustrated) proficiency criteria. Thus, SBG, a component of SBL, is simply the process of creating student grades that explicitly align with the standards. Some of its most important SBG practices include selecting and unpacking priority standards that all students are required to learn (Ainsworth, 2013), using proficiency scales and descriptive feedback rather than simply

accumulating points through assignments and tests, separating academic achievement from behaviors, and allowing multiple attempts to demonstrate learning (Townsend & Wear, 2020).

CBG+ surpasses the aims and scope of SBG with three main features:

- 1) A direct link to academic and non-academic core competencies that are collectively developed and agreed upon as describing what students ought to be when they leave the system (sometimes known as a “portrait of a learner”);
- 2) a focus on transferring learning to new or novel situations as a necessary component of what it means to achieve proficiency for any standard; and
- 3) an expanded sense of student agency as demonstrated by regular, integrated self-assessment and self-directed learning (rather than being something that is occasionally done).

These three features—implemented on a foundation of established SBG practices—are the key to enabling students to successfully apply their knowledge and skills to problems that may be experienced in the world outside of the classroom.

We present a progression of grading reform—from traditional to CBG+—in four stages in the following pages.

## Figure 1. Definition of Key Terms

**Assessment** refers to the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information about students' learning. This information is used to make informed decisions about teaching and learning. Assessment may be formative (ongoing) and summative (final) to provide a comprehensive picture of student progress. Formative assessments are intended to help teachers and students identify students' strengths and areas for improvement, enabling timely interventions to enhance learning outcomes.

**Competency-based grading and assessment (CBG+)** includes the processes used to measure and communicate students' learning that extend from standards-based grading and assessment with additional emphasis on connecting all learning to academic and non-academic core competencies, the ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new and novel situations as an essential component of proficiency, and expanded student agency as demonstrated by increased self-assessment and self-directed learning.

**Core competencies** are the broad academic and non-academic skills, behaviors, and attributes that enable individuals to experience success across a wide variety of settings and contexts.

**Grading** involves indicating students' performance and progress through symbols (such as letters or numbers) or other proficiency indicators. Grading refers to the process of scoring assignments or assessments and the process of combining multiple scores into a final cumulative grade.

**Learning progressions** are the progressive learning steps that students must take to ultimately reach the learning goal. Such progressions include a series of essential knowledge and skills that students must develop and combine, beginning with the most foundational (often below grade level) and culminating with the standard or goal.

**Reporting** is the process of communicating students' learning progress and achievements to various stakeholders, including students, parents, and educators, by providing detailed and understandable information about students' performance.

**Standards-based grading and assessment (SBG+)** are the processes used to measure and communicate students' learning related to transparent and clearly defined targets that are directly connected to established academic or non-academic standards.



## The Four Progressive Stages

The CBG+ progressive model described in this paper presents four stages of development that can lead to a successful implementation of CBG+. The model is presented in this pragmatic way to display a progression of manageable, discrete steps that systems, schools, or teachers can use to determine their current location in their journey, along with next steps to continue down the path toward CBG+. Much like a diverse array of learners in a classroom, educators within a district or school may be in various places along the progression and may need specific and individualized support to take the next reasonable step toward improving grading and assessment practices in a sustainable manner.

Each stage is concisely presented below. They were designed to accommodate the reality that different teachers and schools may be in different places along a continuum of grading reform. Just as students should not progress until they have achieved proficiency with the priority standards, educators and leaders should not begin implementing the practices of a subsequent stage until the priority practices have been fully implemented in earlier stages.

Along with an overview of each stage, we have identified at least one *priority practice* to add a deeper understanding of both the practice and the stage itself. Similar to the notion in curricular planning that not all curricular standards are equally important, the grading and assessment practices in each of the four stages differ in their relative importance and potential for impact. Priority practices are those that we have designated as especially consequential for successful implementation within each stage of the progression.

### Stage 1: Foundational Practices

Stage 1 is the foundation of this grading reform progression in which teachers begin the move from “hodgepodge grading” (Brookhart, 1991) toward competency-based grading. It is a straightforward, deliberate process of establishing clarity and meaning of both student grades and learning goals. Although it consists of just three practices, the stage guides teachers to establish an essential foundation upon which all subsequent practices in the progression are built. It also begins the reconceptualization of grading from a transaction-based process, as often experienced in traditional grading, to a learning-centric one focused on measurement and communication.

STAGE	Stage 1: Foundational Practices
Practices	<b>1a. Teachers establish the meaning and purpose of grades in their classrooms</b> 1b. Teachers prioritize and unpack standards 1c. Teachers create standards-based curricular units

**Note:** Priority practices are in bold.

Because teachers entering this stage are most often new to grading reform, it can take substantial time to complete. In this stage, teachers begin to recognize the important role that grading plays in communicating student learning, and it often requires an objective assessment of the effectiveness of their current practices (see implementation Step 1 on page 16). While Stage 1 is just the beginning of the progression, teachers cannot achieve success at later stages without first implementing these practices to establish a firm foundation of reform.

The practices in this stage focus on clarity and purpose in teachers' understanding of the purpose of grading (Practice 1a) and learning standards (Practices 1b and 1c), but they do not extend to any specific teacher practices related to the creation of grades. The priority practice in Stage 1 requires teachers to *clearly establish the meaning and purpose of their own grades*. Doing so can help teachers begin to reimagine what their grades are and can become. This practice, along with ongoing dialogue, reading, and reflection on grading reform, can lead to the questioning of traditional practices that are used merely because "they have always been done that way" or because "that's how I was always graded in school." A clearly stated purpose will also help students and parents understand the teacher's grading practices and make informed decisions with student report card grades.

After the purpose and meaning of grades is well established, teachers must do the essential work of prioritizing and unpacking learning standards in order to focus their curriculum, clarify learning targets, and establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum for each class they teach. Subsequently, assignments and assessments can be carefully aligned to the learning standards and mapped according to necessary time requirements. Such planning is an essential component of standards-based learning, and overlooking this important work will hamstring teachers' and schools' journeys toward SBG and CBG+.

### **Stage 2: Transitional Practices**

Stage 2 of the progression continues where the previous stage left off in the development of a grading reform foundation that includes a clear purpose for grading and a focus on standards. A significant component of this transition includes a mindset shift toward one that focuses exclusively on learning in the context of grading.

In this transitional stage, teachers actively move away from traditional practices like percentage scales and punitive grading methods toward more evidence-based approaches focused on assessing learning standards such as using the four-point scale, removing non-academic factors from the gradebook, and increasing the weight of summative assessments to prevent the penalizing of practice.

STAGE	Stage 2: Transitional Practices
<b>Practices</b>	2a. Teachers minimize the number of gradebook categories and increase the weight of summative assessment <b>2b. Teachers transition away from grading non-academic factors</b> 2c. Teachers transition away from the traditional percentage scale

**Note:** Priority practices are in bold.

These deliberate and highly visible shifts away from traditional grading practices are prerequisites of Stage 3, where all assessment and grading practices are used exclusively for measuring and reporting achievement of priority standards.

Students and parents will notice—and likely question—these changes in practice as they begin to diverge from traditional processes and routines. The foundation set in Stage 1 will help teachers gain and maintain comfort and confidence in their work through these challenges. Further, teachers may find that the public visibility of these changes may spark more collaboration and conversations about grading reform—often with teachers, counselors, and administrators. Most importantly, these conversations must also occur with their students in their own classrooms so students develop a more active understanding of the role grading can play in their learning.

In that regard, the priority practice in Stage 2 is *removing non-academic factors from report card grades*. Common forms of non-academic factors in the gradebook include attendance, behavior, collaboration, citizenship, effort, engagement, homework com-

pletion, and participation (Guskey, 2020; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). For grades to exclusively reflect learning, there is a need to end long-standing practices like awarding points for extra credit and participation and deducting them for late work. Some of these practices can be stopped immediately, such as awarding extra credit for wearing school colors, while others first require putting alternative procedures in place. For example, communication to parents/guardians about students' progress will require behavioral factors (attendance, participation, timeliness of work submission) reported separately from the academic grade. Such actions take additional time to develop.

Teachers and schools that make visible and justifiable shifts away from traditional grading practices, such as those presented in Stage 2, create the conditions necessary to more sustainably adopt the standards-based grading practices presented in Stage 3.



### ***Stage 3: Standards-Based Grading and Assessment (SBG+)***

Stage 3 requires the full adoption of standards-based grading, which builds upon the first two stages of the progression. But in addition to SBG-specific practices, this stage includes practices that emphasize grading clarity and effective assessment, which broaden the common definition of standards-based grading. For this reason, we have named the stage and the practices it includes *SBG+*.

The application of SBG+ means that teachers avoid practices that distort grade meaning, prevent communicating student academic achievement, and perpetuate inequities. Instead, Stage 3 guides teachers to help students and parents understand grade meaning and grading practices, create grades to communicate students' learning of priority standards, and create balanced and valid summative assessments that measure students' learning of priority standards.



STAGE	Stage 3: Standards-Based Grading and Assessment (SBG+)
<b>Practices</b>	<b>3a. Teachers commit to a grading purpose exclusively focused on communicating student learning</b>
	3b. Teachers help students and parents understand grade meaning and grading practices
	3c. Grades are primarily composed of evidence of student academic achievement gathered from summative assessments
	3d. Teachers use a valid and reliable grading scale that enables them to clearly communicate student learning
	3e. Teachers avoid practices that distort grades from communicating student academic achievement or perpetuate inequities
	<b>3f. Practice is ungraded and used to help students meet learning goals</b>
	3g. Teachers create purposeful and valid summative assessments that measure students' learning of priority standards
	<b>3h. Students have multiple opportunities to display their summative learning of priority standards</b>
	3i. Grades represent students' current achievement levels, not past levels
	3j. Teachers facilitate opportunities for students to self-assess

**Note:** Priority practices are in bold.

In such a standards-based environment, students have multiple opportunities to display their learning of priority standards, grades are primarily or entirely composed of learning data from summative assessments, practice is ungraded and used to help students meet learning goals, and a valid and reliable grading scale is adopted and used that enables teachers to clearly communicate student current achievement levels via report card grades.

**Standards-based grading ensures transparency in all elements of the teaching and learning process: curriculum, assessment, and reporting.**

Stage 3 includes three priority practices, which are described below.

**3a. Teachers commit to a grading purpose exclusively focused on communicating student learning.**

The learning progression presented in this paper begins with establishing a clear grading purpose and meaning (1a), but that purpose is not expressly and exclusively used to communicate student academic achievement until the beginning of Stage 3. In an SBG environment, communicating learning is the single focus of grades, and the scope of the work should be at the collective level—whether that is the team, department, school, or district. With this focus, all teachers make grading decisions that support learning while finding ways to remove practices that distract from learning. For example, because students are fully aware that non-academic factors such as behaviors, effort, and participation will not be a component of their final grade and that this is consistent across classrooms, they know there are no “easy teachers” or “easy As” because *all* grading is focused on communicating levels of proficiency for priority learning standards.

**3f. Practice is ungraded and used to help students meet learning goals.**

In the SBG+ stage, practice and other formative work is not graded; instead, it is given descriptive feedback and may or may not be recorded. This (non-)grading practice sends the message that the classroom is a safe space to make mistakes, and by removing grades from practice, teachers reinforce the growth mindset that they often encourage with



their words. Student motivation comes from teacher feedback and the self-efficacy developed as students experience success and progress in their learning progressions (Bandura, 1997). Further, “ungrading” practice largely puts an end to incentivized cheating on classwork and homework, increasing the learning potential of practice. An example of implemented ungraded practice is teachers correcting or providing specific and descriptive feedback on homework assignments or students provided with answer keys so they may self-assess their performance on practice tasks without fear that early mistakes will “count against them.”

**3h. Students have multiple opportunities to display their summative learning of priority standards.** Providing students with multiple opportunities to display summative learning is important to ensure an equitable learning environment and to allow students the opportunity to rise to rigorous grade-level expectations. When the classroom expectation shifts from *everyone has an opportunity to succeed* to *everyone is expected to succeed even if it may take some students longer than others*, equity becomes a greater part of the classroom culture. By providing additional time and assessment opportunities, along with necessary individualized remediations, teachers can see significant increases in student proficiency levels, particularly in student groups that traditionally underperform (Bloom, 1968). Additionally, when students know that they will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate

**To prepare students for the challenges of the future, schools must empower them to creatively and strategically apply their knowledge and skills in contexts they've never encountered before.**

their knowledge or skills as their learning progresses to the point of proficiency for priority learning standards, stress and anxiety can lessen despite a teacher's high achievement expectations and grades that are created entirely from summative assessments. An example of this practice in action is a reassessment policy that allows students, after demonstrating that additional learning has occurred, to retake summative tests or resubmit summative assignments or projects until the end of the course without incurring a grade penalty.

#### **Stage 4: Competency-Based Grading and Assessment (CBG+)**

Many schools and systems are currently on the path to implementing SBG+, which, if effectively implemented, can go a long way to ensuring that student grades truly reflect student learning. Further, SBG+ can do much to correct the inequities that exist and are perpetuated through traditional grading by removing common sources of bias, such as non-academic factors (Feldman, 2024). However, we assert that SBL and SBG+ do not go far enough to prepare students for a successful future because of the inherent limits placed on student agency in the teacher-centric classroom. In contrast, the competency-based education (CBE) and CBG+ classroom is student-centric. To experience more success in applying knowledge and skills in the world outside of school, learners must have additional opportunities to apply themselves to new and novel scenarios and situations inside and outside of their classrooms. The grading and assessment systems

that are used in schools must act as a catalyst in facilitating these opportunities for students. This is precisely what CBE and CBG+ can allow.

The principles of Stage 4 are largely guided by ideas of the Aurora Institute, a leading educational organization that serves to promote competency-based learning in schools. It includes seven elements in its definition of CBE:

- Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
- Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
- Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.

- Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
- Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable (Aurora Institute, 2023).

Stage 4, through CBG+, attempts to advance the key components of CBE through grading and assessment practices that surpass the previous three stages, and it is marked by the three primary factors:

- 1) linking all student learning to academic and non-academic core competencies,
- 2) focusing on transfer of student knowledge and skills as a core component of proficiency, and
- 3) expanding student agency as demonstrated by (a) increased self-assessment of knowledge, skills, and core competencies, and (b) self-initiated learning—both inside and outside of the classroom.

CBG+ extends learning opportunities by seeking and including opportunities outside of the school as ways to have students apply their skills and learning to new and novel situations. These opportunities also serve as additional sources of summative evidence to allow teachers to “triangulate” evidence of proficiency of the priority standards that they may have only observed in limited ways within the classroom.





The 10 practices that make up Stage 4, the CBG+ stage of the progression, are on the following page. Beneath this figure are descriptions of three priority practices that are especially important to the successful implementation of this stage.



STAGE	Stage 4: Competency-Based Grading and Assessment (CBG+)
Practices	<p>4a. Students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders all know and understand established core competencies for learners</p> <p><b>4b. Students are required to self-assess and link priority standards to core competencies</b></p> <p>4c. Teachers plan, teach, and assess both academic and non-academic core competencies</p> <p>4d. Teachers and students use course content as opportunities for students to demonstrate transfer to other content areas or new/novel situations</p> <p><b>4e. Students' demonstrations of proficiency include the ability to transfer knowledge and skills within and across subject areas</b></p> <p>4f. Students participate in the selection of supporting standards</p> <p>4g. Students and teachers identify relevant learning opportunities outside the classroom where students can develop or transfer knowledge and skills</p> <p>4h. Students self-assess and participate in summative grading of course-based standards</p> <p><b>4i. Students self-assess and report on the development of their core competencies and direct their own learning by identifying next steps to improve</b></p> <p>4j. Schools develop report cards to communicate proficiency indicators and descriptive feedback on priority standards and core competencies</p>

**Note:** Priority practices are in bold.

## In CBG+ environments, student agency increases as students gain voice and choice in what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what the next steps in their learning will be.

**4b. Students are required to self-assess and link priority standards to core competencies.** In CBG+ learning environments, students are able to link every classroom activity, assigned task, and summative assignment to overarching core competencies that are broadly transferable inside and outside the school environment. These core competencies may include such skills as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and personal responsibility. For example, students might be required to know and articulate the connection between writing a clear thesis statement in an English language arts class to core competencies of communication and critical thinking.

**4e. Students' demonstrations of proficiency include the ability to transfer knowledge and skills within and across subject areas.** In CBG+ environments, students are given multiple opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to situations that have not been encountered before—within and across

subject areas. Through teacher feedback and self-reflection, they are able to develop and refine their ability to selectively and strategically apply their knowledge and skills to new and novel situations such as they may find outside of the school environment. The ability to transfer newly gained knowledge and skills to novel situations becomes a core component of proficiency for any learning standard. For example, students might be expected to apply newly gained knowledge of the statistical concepts of mean, median, and mode learned in a mathematics class to a dataset that comes from a scientific experiment.

**4i. Students self-assess and report on the development of their core competencies and direct their own learning by identifying next steps to improve.** In CBG+ environments, students understand how every learning experience may advance their core competencies. They can then seek out additional learning and developmental opportunities to grow or strengthen on specific core competencies that they have self-identified for needed development and growth. For example, a student who identifies that the core competency of *communicating* needs further self-development may seek out learning opportunities outside of the school day, such as joining a Toastmasters group or asking for a customer-facing role at their workplace.





## Concurrent Progressions: Student Agency and Teacher Collaboration

Moving through the progressive stages of grading and assessment reform does not happen in a vacuum. Our experience in this implementation work has taught us there are two concurrent factors that must be considered as schools or systems move through each stage of grading reform.

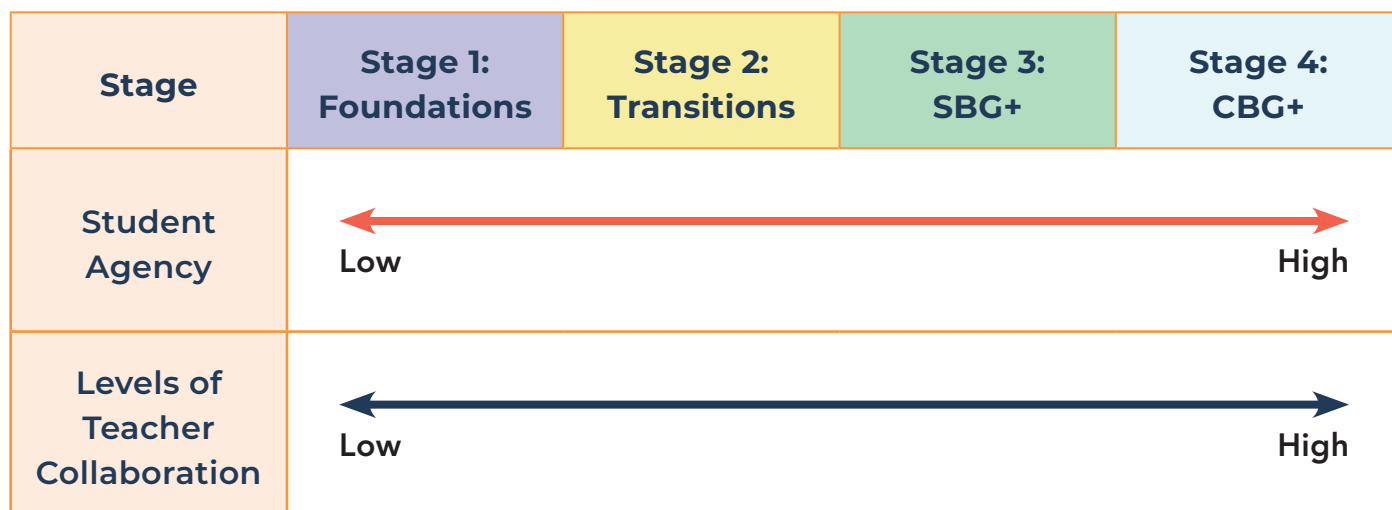
The first factor signals the expansion of student agency in all classroom practices as the progression moves toward the CBG+ stage. Bloomberg et al. (2022) describe agency as “the power people exhibit when they can think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories” (p. 33). CBG+ simultaneously requires and fosters classroom practices that give students

increased voice and choice in what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what the next steps in their learning will be. Figure 2 shows student agency, in the context of their learning, must constantly be increasing in the move toward CBG+. Developing and implementing classroom practices that increase student agency is not the focus of this paper. However, it must be acknowledged that for a district, school, or classroom teacher to attempt to move to competency-based grading and assessment without addressing this critical factor along the way is folly. The end goal of CBG+ is students having the necessary knowledge and skills along with the ability to know when to use them to meet the challenges of their futures. However, learning environments where teachers continue to exert total control over all aspects of learning and assessment is antithetical to this goal.

The second factor in the concurrent progressions (Figure 2) focuses on the teacher collaboration and collective efficacy required to progress to higher levels of the progression. Stages 1 and 2 are marked by individuals or “pockets” of teachers who are transitioning their grading and assessment practices away from traditional structures. Conversely, Stage 3 requires a collective collaborative commitment to determine essential standards and create quality summative assessments for use across classrooms. Stage 4 extends this concept even further by focusing on teacher collaboration—sometimes with partners outside of the school—to create opportunities for

students to apply their skills and knowledge across different subject areas and in new and novel contexts. High levels of effective collaboration do not necessarily come naturally to classroom teachers who may be accustomed to having high levels of independence and autonomy. Therefore, if a district or school wishes to move through the progression toward SBG+ or CBG+, it is incumbent upon leaders to (a) provide the necessary professional learning and collaborative structures and (b) foster a culture that expects teachers to harness the impact of collective teacher efficacy and support each other in improving classroom and assessment practices.

**Figure 2. Concurrent Progressions of Student Agency and Teacher Collaboration**



## Taking Action with the Progression

Classroom teachers, school principals, or system leaders who are dissatisfied with current grading and assessment practices may hesitate to begin the reform process because of the inherent challenges that accompany disrupting the traditions that parents, guardians, and board members often associate with school. This is because traditional grading and reporting practices are part of what educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) refer to as “the grammar of schooling.” That is to say, they are conventions and practices that are so structurally and culturally embedded in schools that they tend to resist most reform efforts over the course of decades or even centuries.

Indeed, grading and reporting practices have remained steadfastly—or perhaps even stubbornly—similar for over a century in the United States despite attempts to change them (Brookhart et al., 2016). This steadfastness may be one aspect of grading that has helped to maintain a certain level of societal trust in or comfort with schools in an era of much mistrust and maligning of public education by certain media outlets and stakeholder groups who are reluctant to witness change. However, sticking

with “comfortable” traditional practices will not serve students well to prepare them for their futures. As outlined in the introduction of this paper, today’s school-aged learners will spend their whole lives dealing with new technologies, expanded bodies of knowledge, and changing societal norms that are evolving more rapidly than ever before. Thus, our grading and assessment practices must evolve to support students’ learning in ways that better prepare them for their futures.

Schools must equip students with the knowledge and skills to have maximal agency and confidence in the world outside of school. Retaining traditional grading practices—which Joe Feldman (2024) describes as inaccurate, biased, unmotivating, and inequitable—is not the best way forward. Moving to competency-based grading and assessment is a pathway to helping build and maintain parents’ and the public’s confidence that students will leave schools with the tools they need to thrive in whatever context they may find themselves in their future.

But how can educators, in the face of such inertia, begin to make positive and effective changes?

We suggest that the progression of grading reform outlined in this paper is a place to start.





Just as students in a classroom begin the school year at different achievement levels with different strengths and areas for growth, the same can be said of classroom teachers, schools, or even systems when it comes to grading and assessment. Teachers and leaders can feel overwhelmed when faced with the task of implementing a grading and assessment system designed to better address the varying needs of a highly diverse group of students. The advice we give is to keep the end in mind, but take one reasonable step at a time toward that desired end goal.

Sometimes educational reforms fail because educators try or are expected to do too much all at once. As with any learning progression, there is a *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) that needs to be identified and respected for each educator, school, or within the system as a whole. The ZPD is the space between what one can already do without support and what one cannot do even with support (Vygotsky, 1978). Our goal in presenting CBG+ as the end of a progression of grading reform that extends from standards-based learning and grading is to allow districts, schools, and individual classroom teachers to identify their current reality (what they can already do) and determine reasonable and achievable next



steps (things they will be able to do with some support) to continue along the progression toward CBG+. Some practices in the progression may, at a given time, be too far outside of the ZPD to implement without intermediate practices first in place. Broadly speaking, attempting to jump to either Stages 3 or 4 without first establishing Stages 1 and 2 will likely lead to significant struggles in implementation because Stages 3 and 4 are outside of a system's ZPD.

Remember that every step away from traditional grading and assessment practices and toward CBG+ is progress toward increasing learner agency and equity. This progression of grading reform is a structure that can be applied to a school's or system's current approach to grading and assessment to transform it through a series of reasonable changes to one that fosters competency-based learning, assessment, and grading throughout the system.

**The best grading and assessment practices reflect an understanding that grades are simply symbols intended to communicate student learning.**

## Seven Implementation Steps

Though much has been written about implementing grading reform, a definitive step-by-step guide that works in multiple contexts simply does not exist. Below are seven steps to consider while beginning or continuing your journey toward implementing competency-based grading and assessment. These steps may be used in a single classroom, a school site, or across an entire district.

- 1) **Determine your current reality.** Use the list of practices within each stage to conduct an assessment of current practices. Look for explicit evidence of occurrence along with frequency of occurrence. At the classroom level, an individual teacher may use the list to self-assess their grading practices. At the school level or district level, leaders may use the list to assess whether practices are scattered in individual classrooms or are widely permeated through an entire building or system. (We have provided the list of practices organized by stage in Appendix A as a tool to help accomplish this step.)
- 2) **Address gaps in practice in earlier stages.** The practices presented in this grading reform progression are organized into four stages, with the premise that the early stages are foundational to the later ones. Regardless of the length of time that a teacher, school, or system has been working on grading reform, ensuring that foundational practices are in place before moving on to the later stages will help ensure sustainable implementation.

- 3) **Decide on the next reasonable step, and take action.** Collectively, the four progressive stages contain 26 practices, which are far too many to implement all at once. After assessing the current reality of grading reform (see Appendix A) and remaining within a determined *zone of proximal development*, select a small number of practices (approximately 1–3) to keep the reform focused and manageable. Then begin implementation.
- 4) **Consider the interdependence of classroom/instructional practices and grading/assessment practices.** Classroom/instructional practices and grading/assessment practices are inextricably linked and cannot be sustainably reformed if considered separately from each other. Changes to grading/assessment practices that evolve through incremental changes to practices or that are mandated through policy change will require attention and support focused on classroom/instructional practices—and vice versa.
- 5) **Do the work collaboratively.** Harness the proverbial notion of “Go fast to go alone; go together to go far,” and ensure the work of grading and assessment reform is being done in connection and collaboration with others. Seek out and connect with advocates, allies, like-minded colleagues, and coaches—both within the school or out in the community—to support each other in making sustainable change.
- 6) **Expect resistance, and prepare to communicate.** Many educators start taking action with grading and assessment reforms because of convictions they have developed through experience and reflection. Many others will need convincing and may be skeptical—or even intransigent—to change long-standing and widespread practices until they understand how current practices are insufficient and how standards-based and competency-based practices are beneficial. Some of the most intractable resisters require first-hand experiences before changing their minds about such reform efforts. Thus, changing the hearts and minds of practitioners requires sustained and deliberate communication efforts alongside the work of implementing the reforms.
- 7) **Relentlessly articulate the vision and the “why” of CBG+.** Similar to Step 6, others may not be willing to change—or support any changes—unless the *why* is made clear to them. A consistent and persistent articulation of the benefits that learners experience with a CBG+ approach alongside a description of the risks of *not* improving grading and assessment practices in a rapidly changing world will be required to help others understand the necessity of grading reform efforts.





## Conclusion

One of the main goals of schools—regardless of its location or level—is to prepare learners to be successful and productive in the world outside of schools. Far too often, however, students leave schools with the understanding that they possess the knowledge and skills to be successful, but then struggle to apply it in other aspects of their lives. CBG+ is a model that can disrupt this common outcome by restoring and strengthening schools' abilities to increase student agency and truly prepare learners for their uncertain futures through improved grading and assessment practices.

The model presented in this paper articulates a continuum of practices to sustainably implement grading reform over four stages. Stage 1 involves individual teachers articulating an individual grading purpose and organizing curriculum units by prioritized and unpacked standards. Stage 2 transitions away from traditional grading practices that are ineffective or harmful, including multiple gradebook categories, grading non-academic factors, and the percentage scale. Next, Stage 3 signals

the implementation of standards-based grading with an increased emphasis on grading clarity, communication, and effective assessment (SBG+). Finally, when classroom instructional and assessment practices are thoughtfully designed to foster increased student agency, students can link all their learning to core competencies, proficiency includes the ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new and novel situations, and students fully embrace self-assessment and the ability to self-direct the next steps in their learning, schools can claim they have successfully implemented Stage 4—the stage of competency-based grading and assessment.

Grading reform is difficult work—particularly when the goal is CBG+, but it is essential in the quest to create schools that will more effectively prepare students for uncertain futures. This model is intended to make that process more achievable and sustainable. We encourage teachers, schools, or system leaders to study and apply the practices within the progression of grading reform to determine their current reality and take measured action in a path toward competency-based grading and assessment.

## Authors

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Josh Kunnath is a passionate educator with over 15 years of experience as a high school English teacher, consultant, and researcher. He is dedicated to partnering with teachers, school leaders, and teams to improve grading and assessment practices, believing these areas are vital for fostering positive change in students' lives. Josh has worked extensively with educators across the country to implement competency-based grading, presenting his insights at regional, state, and national conferences. As a researcher, he has published six articles on grading and assessment and serves as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*. Josh is proud to be part of The Core Collaborative, supporting schools in transforming learning through innovative practices. He lives in Central California with his wife and two children, and enjoys reading, traveling, and spending time with his family.

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Ryan Sikkes brings over 20 years of experience in teaching and educational leadership from Canada's Yukon Territory, including his recent role as Assistant Deputy Minister of Schools and Student Services overseeing 30 schools and programs for 6,000 students. He holds degrees in education and curriculum and instruction, with a doctorate in educational leadership and policy from the University of British Columbia. Ryan's work focuses on competency-based grading and school improvement, aligning with his role at The Core Collaborative, where he supports educators in creating equitable and impactful learning environments. Known for his commitment to education—and his humor—Ryan balances his professional dedication with a lighthearted outlook on life.

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## Appendix A

### Determining the Current Reality: An Inventory of the Progression of Grading Reform

Practice	Y/N	Evidence
<b>Stage 1: Foundational Practices</b>		
1a. Teachers establish the meaning and purpose of grades in their classrooms		
1b. Teachers prioritize and unpack standards		
1c. Teachers create standards-based curricular units		
<b>Stage 2: Transitional Practices</b>		
2a. Teachers minimize the number of gradebook categories and increase the weight of summative assessment		
2b. Teachers transition away from grading non-academic factors		
2c. Teachers transition away from the traditional percentage scale		
<b>Stage 3: Standards-Based Grading and Assessment (SBG+)</b>		
3a. Teachers commit to a grading purpose exclusively focused on communicating student learning		
3b. Teachers help students and parents understand grade meaning and grading practices		

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Practice	Y/N	Evidence
3c. Grades are primarily composed of evidence of student academic achievement gathered from summative assessments		
3d. Teachers use a valid and reliable grading scale that enables them to clearly communicate student learning		
3e. Teachers avoid practices that distort grades from communicating student academic achievement or perpetuate inequities		
3f. Practice is ungraded and used to help students meet learning goals		
3g. Teachers create purposeful and valid summative assessments that measure students' learning of priority standards		
3h. Students have multiple opportunities to display their summative learning of priority standards		
3i. Grades represent students' current achievement levels, not past levels		
3j. Teachers facilitate opportunities for students to self-assess		

## Appendix A

### Determining the Current Reality: An Inventory of the Progression of Grading Reform

Practice	Y/N	Evidence
<b>Stage 4: Competency-Based Grading and Assessment (CBG+)</b>		
4a. Students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders all know and understand established core competencies for learners		
4b. Students are required to self-assess and link priority standards to core competencies		
4c. Teachers plan, teach, and assess both academic and non-academic core competencies		



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