



Frequently Asked Questions: Grading Practices

The primary purpose of grading in the Ballard Community School District is to communicate consistently and clearly about student's progress and achievement, so grades are a direct reflection of student learning. With that being said, we wanted to continually provide more information to ensure that communication is accurate, timely, and responsive. If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact either of the secondary principals, Chris Deason and Tom Maher, or Katie Claeys, Director of Teaching and Learning.

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1. **What is standards-referenced grading (SRG)?**

In education, the term standards-referenced refers to instructional approaches that are aligned to learning standards- i.e., written descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific stage of their education. In other words, *standards-referenced* refers to the use of learning standards to guide what gets taught and assessed in schools. ([return to questions](#))

2. **What are the advantages of SRG?**

Improved communication and additional feedback for parents, students, and teachers- parents and students will see areas of academic strength and weaknesses in the grade book rather than seeing a test score or homework assignment and wondering what the next steps might be. Teachers will know which standards they need to re-teach. Students will know which standards for which they need additional learning opportunities and/or practice. ([return to questions](#))

3. **How is the role of assessment different in this system?**

In a traditional grading system, student assessments were often given for the purpose of entering a score in the grade book. Assessments in an SRG system are given for the purpose of identifying future learning opportunities for students. ([return to questions](#))

4. **How will this new grading system affect student grades as they are viewed by outside organizations (colleges, scholarship decision boards, etc.) when compared to students from other schools using a traditional grading system?**

Colleges want grade point averages to be an accurate reflection of student learning and understanding. Grades should correlate to a student's performance on high stakes assessments, such as the ACT or Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress. The reality is that colleges receive transcripts from home-school students, students educated overseas, and students attending public and private high schools. Each high school engages in its own process to report grades and each college engages in its own process to interpret those grades. [Here is an article](#) from a Drake professor who asked colleges that very same question. ([return to questions](#))

5. **How does SRG help students become prepared for college?**

Through the use of scales, students are better able to identify one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner. Being self-motivated to meet course objectives, developing strong study habits, and mastering course standards are all aspects, regardless of grading system, that will help students in college. ([return to questions](#))

6. **Will the three behavior grades be incorporated into the actual grade for the student?**

The three behaviors, *Collaborates effectively with peers*, *Communicates effectively and respectfully*, and *Uses time wisely and meets deadlines* do not calculate into a child's course grade. They exist in Infinite Campus as a communication tool to parents and students about valuable work habits. ([return to questions](#))

7. **What is the role of "practice" in grading?**

We do not penalize students for making mistakes when completing practice assignments. Because learning occurs at different rates and in different ways for individual students, all students have multiple opportunities to practice key skills before they are assessed and graded. Teachers are still responsible for recording information in Infinite Campus about how students are progressing. These practice opportunities will appear in the *Body of Evidence* category in each course. Practice, including

homework, is still a key component of learning, and in most classrooms, students may be required to complete key practice assignments before they are able to retake an assessment. ([return to questions](#))

8. How does this practice prepare students for the “real world”? There are no retakes in the “real world.”

It’s only sensible to expect different things of students during the learning process than we expect of them when it’s time to demonstrate final proficiency. Applying expectations for a high level of competency to students who are in the process of coming to know content is counterproductive, even harmful.

Adult professionals flourish through multiple assessment opportunities and retakes. Surgeons practice on cadavers before doing surgeries on live patients. Architects redesign building plans until they meet all the specifications listed. Pilots rehearse landings and take-offs hundreds of times in simulators and in solo flights. Lawyers practice debate and analysis of arguments before litigating real cases. Teachers become much more competent and effective by teaching the same content multiple times, reflecting on what worked and what didn’t work each time.

LSAT. Praxis. SAT. Bar exam. Driver’s licensure. Auto mechanic certification exam. Every one of these assessments reflects the adult-level, working-world responsibilities our students will one day face. Many of them are high stakes: people’s lives depend on these tests’ validity as accurate measures of individual competence. All of them have opportunities for adults to redo them for full credit. ([return to questions](#))

9. What if my student did not do well on an assessment? Can he/she retake it?

If your student needs more help learning a skill or to retake or redo an assignment, they are able to work with their teacher to do so (the exception is a semester final because it is time sensitive due to the posting of grades). Evidence of re-learning can take a lot of different forms and is not always collected through a traditional “quiz” or “test.” Students may also be asked to show their learning through other assessments, including projects, writing assignments, or in conversations with their teacher. Please encourage your student to communicate with their teacher regarding reassessment policies if they would like to retake or redo an assessment. ([return to questions](#))

10. What does it mean if my student has an “M” in Infinite Campus?

If your student has an “M” on a piece of evidence noted in Infinite Campus under *Final Topic Score*, this is considered an essential priority assessment and is a critical piece of evidence for them to complete. Please help us by noticing “Ms” in Infinite Campus and reminding your student of the importance of them. Students are encouraged to visit with their teachers about ways they can complete these essential priority assessments. Without students developing a plan to complete the evidence, an “NE” (No Evidence) may be recorded and a “F” (failing grade) in a class may be given. If the student is unable to complete an “M” within the specified time but has made a plan to complete it, an “I” will be used to signal that the grade is incomplete at this time. ([return to questions](#))

11. Why are some teachers using a 4 pt. scale? I’m used to seeing assignments out of total points.

At Ballard, we engage in an on-going curriculum review cycle. Part of that curriculum review process is teachers building a deep understanding of the K-12 Iowa Core standards, or articulated learning outcomes. Part of that process also includes our teachers clarifying priority standards and developing proficiency scales and assessments to ensure every student is held to the same standard, *no matter the teacher they are assigned*. Ultimately, those classrooms will use those scales and assessments as a way

to score student work and give students feedback about where they are in relation to the priority standards being taught. Many districts refer to this practice as *standards-referenced reporting*. We have not completed the curriculum review cycle for each content area yet, but as we do, all teachers will be implementing a 4 point learning scale. We have some teachers using the 4 pt scale currently as part of a smaller pilot. The purpose of this pilot is to gather feedback for our district-wide SRG district leadership team, so the guidance they create for all teachers eventually be implementing these practices is clear, consistent, and doable. ([return to questions](#))

12. What is the difference between total points and a 4 pt. scale? Is my student disadvantaged because they are in a class that uses one way versus another way?

The difference here is *how a teacher arrives at a score for a piece of student evidence*. Both scales feed into calculating a letter grade in the same GPA scale. The goal of our common grading practices is to ensure that Ballard's grading scale is clear, consistent, supportive of student learning, and provides meaningful communication to all stakeholders.

In a 4 point scale, teachers use a common scale to score student work against a standard or group of standards. Based on the student performance on the piece of evidence, the teacher assigns a level of proficiency as the score.

In a total points system, teachers assign a specific value to a piece of student evidence. Not all student work has the same value; typically it's based on the level of difficulty or importance placed on the assignment, assessment, or project. ([return to questions](#))

13. Why is the district transitioning away from “total points” towards the use of common 4 pt. scales?

Research has shown that when teachers assign their own weighting and point values to assessments, students can receive a broad range of scores from teacher to teacher on the same assignment. This can lead to inconsistencies, and potential inequities, with regard to grades that students earn. As our district grading philosophy articulates that we value clear and consistent practices across the district for all students, we need to align our practices to that value.

The concept of using a common 4 point scale is similar to an approach most parents and students are very familiar with: the use of a rubric to score assignments. Well-written rubrics, or scales, define a continuum of knowledge and understanding related to a topic or standard. As a part of our curriculum review process, all content areas are developing common scales so that we evaluate student work through the lens of the standard on a scale that is common across disciplines. Our goal moving forward is to provide both students and parents a view of your student's gradebooks from a common perspective without having to decipher individual classroom scoring preferences. ([return to questions](#))

14. My student believes it's impossible to get an A on the 4 pt. scale. Is that true?

Earning an A at Ballard Community Schools means that you have *met* or *exceeded* the target standards of a class. The same is true whether or not you are in a class that uses a 4 point scale or a total points calculation. Likewise, all classrooms will be working towards implementing the [guiding principles the districtwide SRG leadership team](#) articulated. This includes instructional practices such as teachers articulating to students clear learning targets, allowing students to show their learning in multiple ways and to receive descriptive feedback, and to relearn and reassess when needed. These instructional practices are focused on student learning, our primary purpose as a school system. One fundamental shift for all of our classrooms at Ballard is that grades will be based on *levels of achievement* and will

not include “grade inflation/deflation” measures that can distort the accuracy of a grade, including: the use of extra credit and/or reward/punishing behaviors through the use of a grade. Accurate and clear grades reflect what your students *know* and *are able to do* in relation to our district priority standards. ([return to questions](#))

15. My student earned a 2.0 on his/her first final topic score. His/her grade is currently a C-. Should I be worried? How should I respond to my student’s concern?

Earning a 2 on a 4 point scale means that students are approaching proficiency on a key priority standard for the class. This is entirely appropriate and expected early on in a learning cycle. Throughout the semester and year, our teachers revisit key priorities and offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency and beyond (to include 3, 3.5 or 4). Further, our K-12 grading practices indicate that we do not penalize students for early attempts at learning or for making mistakes when they practice a new skill, so when students demonstrate they know and understand the target, they are given full credit for that understanding. When students have this accurate feedback about where they are in relation to the learning target, they have the information, support and instruction that they need to close that gap. Please partner with us as a school community in helping our students focus on learning and on developing the stamina and habits of mind to work hard, to persevere, and to embrace a growth mindset. ([return to questions](#))

16. My child goes to BHS, and he has had a few other classes where a 4 pt scale has been used. However, I don’t see those classes listed as part of this pilot. How is that different?

As a building Ballard High School has been studying grading practices for the past few years. As has been traditional practice, each teacher has set up his/her gradebook as he/she sees fit. As a result of studying these grading practices, a few teachers wanted to try out a 4 pt scale in their classroom as a result of that focus on improved grading practices. When the district began this districtwide pilot process, we worked to make sure the grades associated with the 4.0, 3.5, 3.0, etc. were the same in both cohorts- those high school classrooms and the SRG pilot teachers. ([return to questions](#))

17. How is the district communicating decisions about grading with students?

No matter how a teacher assigns points in a gradebook, students are a fundamental part of the grading process. In fact, research indicates that when students (1) understand the learning target, and (2) receive feedback about where they are in relation to the learning target, they have a much greater likelihood of learning at a high level. This process is at the center of learning, and as such, belongs as a conversation in every classroom at Ballard. It is an expectation that students see how the work they are engaged in each day relates to part of the proficiency scale, and assessments are aligned to the levels articulated on the scale. All teachers in this pilot are receiving regular professional development in quality assessment and instructional strategies, including grading practices. ([return to questions](#))

18. If my student has all semester to reach proficiency, why would he/she try at the beginning of the semester?

Let us be clear: a change to a 4.0 scale does not mean that our expectations around student effort and work ethic have changed. Learning is a partnership between the teacher and the students. Our teachers will work diligently to clearly communicate learning expectations through the use of proficiency scales, provide on-going feedback to students, and utilize fair and accurate assessment practices to report student learning. In turn, we expect students to engage fully in the learning cycle by participating in class, asking questions when they don’t understand the course content, do the practice that teachers provide, and give their best effort in class and on assessments and on other evidence teachers collect. Below is the reassessment policy that the pilot group of teachers is utilizing this semester (spring 2020).

Teachers will work diligently with students to make sure they are learning because *student learning* is the purpose of our entire organization. However, teachers have the right to tell students that they do not see him/her putting in the effort to warrant reassessment opportunities and expect that effort to be put forth before reassessment opportunities are given. ([return to questions](#))

| Tight | Loose |
|---|--|
| Students have up to three weeks from the end of a unit to indicate a re-learning interest to the teacher | Teacher decides what the re-learning opportunities will consist of |
| If at the end of those three weeks the child is still in the process of re-learning, he/she can keep working | Teacher gets to set the deadline for when the re-learning will end, as well as when and how the child will show evidence of his/her new understanding (reassess) |
| Student must complete any practice he/she didn't complete during the unit of instruction in order to reassess | |

19. How many school districts in Iowa are utilizing this system of grading?

The Iowa Department of Education does not keep data on this. In 2017, Heartland AEA surveyed the 56 districts in central Iowa that it serves, and 74% indicated they were currently involved in SRG work. ([return to questions](#))

20. How is the district calculating letter grades for students on the 4 pt. scale for the current pilot?

The conversion scale below indicates the range associated with each letter grade during our current pilot. All courses on the 4 pt. scale will still have an end-of-course letter grade. ([return to questions](#))

| Letter grade | Current Conversion scale |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| A | 3.00-4.00 |
| A- | 2.83-2.99 |
| B+ | 2.66-2.82 |
| B | 2.50-2.65 |
| B- | 2.34-2.49 |
| C+ | 2.17-2.33 |
| C | 2.00-2.16 |
| C- | 1.83-1.99 |
| D+ | 1.66-1.82 |
| D | 1.51-1.65 |

| | |
|----|-----------|
| D- | 1.50 |
| F | 0.00-1.49 |

21. How does this impact my high school student's GPA?

Nothing will change about how a letter grade is calculated in a student's GPA. The chart below indicates how letter grades factor into a student's GPA on his/her transcript: ([return to questions](#))

| Letter grade | GPA value |
|--------------|-----------|
| A | 4.00 |
| A- | 3.67 |
| B+ | 3.33 |
| B | 3.00 |
| B- | 2.67 |
| C+ | 2.33 |
| C | 2.00 |
| C- | 1.67 |
| D+ | 1.33 |
| D | 1.00 |
| D- | 0.67 |
| F | 0.00 |