

Competency Based Learning

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions



Competency based learning is characterized by clearly defined learning targets, called competencies, that are aligned to high quality, balanced assessments. At Sanborn, our competency based grading system seeks to provide meaningful feedback so both students and parents can track student progress toward mastery of key academic concepts, reflect upon strengths and weaknesses, and identify multiple pathways to deeper learning. This guide answers some common questions about competency based learning and grading.

If you have any other specific questions about your child's progress, we invite you to speak with their teachers as well as with the school administrators. We are all on the same team!

What is competency-based grading?

Competency-based grading communicates how students are performing on a set of clearly defined learning targets called competencies. The purpose of competency-based grading is to identify what a student knows, or is able to do, in relation to pre-establish learning targets, as opposed to simply averaging grades/scores over the course of a grading period, which can mask what a student has learned, or not learned, in a specific course.



Apples & Oranges

How should a student/parent view student grades now that the system of A-F has been replaced? What is considered to be an A in the new grading system?

You cannot really compare a traditional grading system to competency-based grading. It is like comparing “apples to oranges”. Competency-based grading identifies a competency and indicates whether or not a student is meeting the competency at a given point in the school year. A score of (P) is defined as meeting grade level competency and indicates that a student has demonstrated mastery of the skills that were expected to be learned by that point in the grading period.

How does competency-based grading differ from traditional grading?

Unlike with traditional grading systems, a competency-based grading system measures a student’s mastery of grade-level competencies by prioritizing the most recent, consistent level of performance. Thus, a student who may have struggled at the beginning of a course, when first encountering new material, may still be able to demonstrate mastery of key content/concepts by the end of a grading period.

In a traditional grading system, a student’s performance for an entire quarter is averaged together. Early quiz scores that were low would be averaged together with more proficient performance later in the course, resulting in a lower overall grade than current performance indicates.

Additionally, competency-based report cards separate academic performance from work habits and behavior in order to provide parents a more accurate view of a student’s progress in both academic and behavioral areas. Variables such as effort, participation, timeliness, cooperation, attitude and attendance are reported separately, not as an indicator of a student’s academic performance.

Where else in the area is competency based instruction and grading being implemented?

Competency based instruction is a New Hampshire law (RSA 193-C:3) as well as a Department of Education Policy (306:261). It is also already implemented in a number of school districts in the area, including Epping, Oyster River, and SAU 16 (Exeter, Stratham, Brentwood). Competency based grading is also being implemented in these districts as well.

How are my child’s marks determined?

A student’s performance on a series of assessments (both formative and summative) will be used to determine a student’s overall grade in a course. Practice assignments (homework) are just that, practice, and thus should serve primarily as a source of feedback and instructional support for both students and teachers. Scores on practice assignments should not be used as a major component of a student’s academic grade. Teachers may require students to complete all of their practice work prior to allowing them to take, or retake, an assessment.

The Grading Scale

Sanborn Regional School District								
High and Middle School Grading Scale					Elementary Grading Scale			
	Level	Code	Performance Descriptor	Score Range	Level	Code	Performance Descriptor	Score Range
Competent	Exemplary	E	The student consistently and independently demonstrates the ability to analyze and synthesize essential content knowledge and skills in a new task.	3.50 – 4.00	Exemplary	E	The student consistently and independently demonstrates the ability to analyze and synthesize essential content knowledge and skills in a new task.	3.60 – 4.00
	Proficient	P	The student consistently and independently demonstrates the ability to apply and transfer essential content, knowledge and skills in a new task.	2.50 – 3.49	Proficient	P	The student consistently and independently demonstrates the ability to apply and transfer essential content, knowledge and skills in a new task.	3.59-2.70
	Basic Proficiency	BP	The student demonstrates the ability to comprehend and apply essential content, knowledge and skills in a familiar task.	1.50 – 2.49	In Progress	IP	The student demonstrates the emerging ability to apply and transfer essential content, knowledge and skills.	2.69-1.7
Not Competent	Limited Proficiency	LP	The student is not demonstrating the application and transfer of essential content, knowledge and skills.	0.50 – 1.49	Limited Proficiency	LP	The student is not demonstrating the application and transfer of essential content, knowledge and skills.	1.69-0.0
	Override Codes	NYC	NYC: The student is not yet competent in the performance standard(s).	0.0 – 0.0	Override Codes	NYC	NYC: The student is not yet competent in the performance standard(s).	0.0 – 0.0
		IWS	IWS: The student has not produced a sufficient amount of evidence to determine the level for which they have met the performance standard(s).	0.00		IWS	IWS: The student has not produced a sufficient amount of evidence to determine the level for which they have met the performance standard(s).	0.00

What do the letters in the grading scale represent?

- Exemplary (E) would indicate that a student exceeds a standard by consistently demonstrating an advanced level of understanding and/or the ability to apply their knowledge at a higher level.
- Proficient (P) would indicate that a student has independently achieved the competency. The student demonstrates mastery of the competency.
- In Progress (IP)/Basic Proficiency (BP) would indicate that a student is developing an understanding of a competency, but still may be in need of additional instruction and/or support.
- Limited Proficiency (LP) would indicate minimal understanding of a competency. The student shows limited evidence of understanding the competency.
- Not Yet Competent (NYC) would indicate that the student is not yet competent in the performance standard.
- Insufficient Work Shown (IWS) would indicate that the student has not produced enough evidence to determine at what level they have met the performance standard.

Is it possible to achieve a grade of E?

Yes, it is. However, a score of (E) indicates performance that is **consistently above** what is expected for mastery at that point in the school year. Exemplary (E) level work would indicate a much deeper understanding of a competency, the ability to apply that knowledge in multiple situations, make connections and extend learning beyond the targeted goal.

If a student is being accelerated in any grade level/subject area with above grade level competency or materials, is that student required to get an E on their report card?

By definition, Exemplary (E) level work reflects higher order thinking, application, connection and extension of targeted goals. While being instructed above grade level is not required in order to achieve an (E), students who are taught above grade level have consistently shown mastery of a subject at their current grade level. Achieving an (E) does not preclude a teacher from suggesting areas for improvement in the comment section of the report card. Receiving an (E) does not guarantee that a student's performance would remain at that level across all reporting periods, or for all course competencies.

If a student receives LPs all year, does that mean the student will be retained?

Intervention is available at Sanborn to support learners who are behind in math and reading. If a student receives LPs or IP/BPs, it means their work is not yet meeting grade level competency. A number of academic interventions will be offered to those students who are struggling to meet the established competency. Grade level retention is not a practice that is generally supported by research.

Will my child receive zeros for work they don't complete?

Giving a student a zero for not completing an assignment allows the student to escape accountability and results in no learning at all. Instead, the student is expected to complete the assignment to guarantee and demonstrate that the student learns. In the traditional grading approach, many assignments are given as a means of compliance, with the threat of a zero used to punish students who do not comply. However, when meaningful assignments are created, it makes sense that every opportunity to complete them would be available because it is the learning, not merely compliance and completion, that is the end goal.

How will I know if my child needs help?

Receiving a BP/IP, LP, NYC (Not Yet Competent), or IWS (Insufficient Work Shown) on a grade report/report card can be a sign that a student is in need of extra support in the areas where they are receiving low marks. This is one benefit of a competency-based report card, areas in need of support are clearly evident.

What are Work Study Practices?

In June 2013, NH Senate Bill 48 was passed and included a requirement for students to be assessed on their Work Study Practices. The bill defines Work-Study Practices (WSP) as "those behaviors that enhance learning achievement and promote a positive work ethic such as, but not limited to, listening and following directions, accepting responsibility, staying on task, completing work accurately, managing time wisely, showing initiative, and being cooperative."

Work Study Practices are assessed based on a student's ability to meet pre-established behavioral guidelines in the following areas: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, self-regulation/control (for elementary schools) and communication, creativity, collaboration and self-direction (middle and high school). All students receive work study practice grades separate from their academic grade in order to provide parents with a more accurate and complete picture of student learning and progress.