

What Is Proficiency-Based Learning?

There are two major differences between proficiency-based learning and the traditional classroom. First, strong performance in one area cannot average out weak performance in another area. For example, in a traditional English class, a student's high grades on reading tests might average out deficient scores in writing, specifically spelling, grammar, and mechanics. As long as the student's overall average is at least 70%, the student will earn credit and move on. In a proficiency-based English class, a student would need to demonstrate proficiency in both reading and writing in order to earn credit. Even if the student's overall average is greater than 70%, the student must demonstrate mastery of all standards in the course to earn credit.

Second, students must demonstrate proficiency in all graduation standards in a course before moving on. If students have yet to master a specific skill, such as using fractions in a math class, they must continue working until they can demonstrate that they have mastered those skills. Skill gaps are identified and addressed... no more passing the buck! If a student doesn't learn something the first time around, teachers keep working with the student but do not pass them on hoping the student will "pick it up later."

Proficiency-based learning requires teachers to be very clear about what students need to learn. In every class, students and parents know precisely what teachers expect—no guesswork is required. Common, consistent methods are used to evaluate student learning in a proficiency-based system. While the learning expectations are fixed, teachers and students have more flexibility in how they choose to meet those expectations. All students must meet the graduation standards, but teachers and students create their own pathways for achievement.

It is also important to note what proficiency-based learning is *not*. While proficiency-based learning requires standards, the Common Core State Standards are not synonymous with proficiency-based learning— a school or community could base its system on any set of standards. Proficiency-based learning is also not synonymous with standardized testing. In fact, proficiency-based learning requires schools to develop more authentic assessments beyond just paper and pencil tests that more accurately determine if students have learned the breadth of topics taught in school, not just those topics on high stakes standardized tests.

- Students will *know* the standards/targets they are working on and what is next in their learning
- Standards/targets posted in classrooms; referred to; tracking of student progress toward mastery

What Is Proficiency-Based Grading?

Question: What is the average of 85, 82, 90, two absences, five late arrivals, three tardy homework assignments, a failure to participate in class on four occasions, two note-passing incidents, and one unusually poor test performance the day the family dog died?

While it may seem mathematically impossible (How can you average together numbers and behaviors?), this kind of calculation happens all the time in schools. It's called *grading*.

Luckily, there are more accurate, equitable, and educationally useful ways to report learning progress and academic achievement. **One approach is proficiency-based grading.**

How It Works

√ **Proficiency-based grades are connected to clearly defined learning objectives.**

Consider this question: What does a C mean? While the grade is a deeply familiar symbol, and more or less everyone has received a C at some point, what does the grade actually convey about learning? What was taught in the course? What knowledge did those C students acquire? What skills did they learn? Can the students write well, do math, conduct research, think critically, communicate effectively, or use a computer? Did they work hard and make a lot of progress over the semester, or did they slack off and hardly try at all? The fact is that the C just doesn't tell us—and yet countless students graduate from high school every year with C grades. Proficiency-based grades are connected to clearly defined learning expectations, so educators and parents know, with far more precision, what a student has actually learned or failed to learn.

√ **Proficiency-based grades separate academic achievement from behaviors.**

In many schools, behaviors such as attendance, tardiness, class participation, or turning in work on time are factored into final grades alongside scores on tests and assignments. While school attendance and class participation are vitally important to success in school, averaging together behaviors and learning obscures academic progress and achievement, making it much harder to determine what students are excelling at or struggling with. Has the student failed to grasp critically important concepts, or did she simply not turn her homework in on time? Is it a learning problem or a behavioral problem? Proficiency-based grading systems report work habits, behaviors, and character traits separately from academic achievement, making it much easier for educators and parents to diagnose learning weaknesses and behavioral issues so that students can get the help they need to succeed. We are calling this "Habits for Success".

√ **Proficiency-based grades are focused on learning progress.**

Despite the fact that public schools were created to teach students knowledge and skills they don't already possess, many grades represent an average of where students start out and where they end up—and how they behaved along the way. In many schools, a student could have a life-changing experience, suddenly realize the importance of doing well in school, decide to work harder, begin studying every night and every weekend, go from failing tests to acing tests, and learn a whole lot—more than ever before—and yet... still fail the course. When grading systems penalize students for poor scores at the beginning of a term, students may be less motivated to work hard or overcome past failures because their final grades won't reflect their effort and learning progress. Proficiency-based grades can incentivize students to work harder and achieve more because progress and effort are recognized and rewarded. Learning is mandatory; time is flexible.