

Assessment and Grading for Learning: FAQ's



The School District of Waukesha is making some qualitative changes to our assessment and grading practices. This has been a focus of study for the past several years and has resulted in heightened expectations for teachers, principals and students. Our district joins many districts around the area and across the state and nation in these efforts. The goal of these changes is to help our students succeed at the very highest levels possible so that they can experience success in any venue after they leave our district, whether that be in college, in technical school, in the work world, or in military service.

1. What exactly is changing with how teachers assess and grade student work?

We are expecting grade-level or course-alike teacher teams to decide together on the essential learning outcomes for each subject or course. We refer to these important concepts as “learning targets”. Our teachers have spent a lot of time studying and reviewing a variety of important documents, including Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, ACT College Readiness Standards and Benchmarks, and 21st Century Skills concepts in order to determine what skills and concepts our students need to know or be able to do by the end of each grade level or secondary course. By doing this, we are hoping to focus instruction on key concepts and skills and deepen the learning experience for our students. In Wisconsin we have long been criticized for having a curriculum that is “a mile wide and an inch deep”. We are directly addressing this concern.

Once the learning targets have been established, the teacher teams develop assessments that will allow students to demonstrate their understanding and skill acquisition. We are working to move beyond pencil/paper and rote memorization tasks to performance assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways (essay, debate, performance, speech, experiment, demonstration). The teachers next determine levels of proficiency for each assessment. Rubrics are designed that detail for students what specifically will be expected on each assessment. Students then can see

what they need to do in order to receive strong feedback about their performance. Students will know, very specifically, what they are grasping and understanding with respect to the learning targets, and where they need to continue to work and grow. The conversation and dialogue between teacher and student moves from a discussion about “points earned” to a conversation about “knowledge and skills gained”. This is a critical paradigm shift in our district.

Perhaps the biggest change we are making is how this feedback will be given to students and reported to parents using our WebGrader online grading system. In the past, teachers would assign letter grades to individual assignments. Now, during the marking period (quarter, trimester, or semester) students will receive a numeric mark for each assessment. Again, we are focusing our efforts on helping our students become more aware of who they are as learners so they can advocate for themselves, better focus their studying and seek assistance in areas that are most challenging. In turn, we are helping our teachers become more prescriptive and strategic in their instruction, understanding that every student learns at a different rate and in different ways. The numeric marks correspond to the following levels of proficiency (knowledge/skill attainment):

4 = Advanced Skills (Can apply the knowledge/skills to novel situations, can teach others)

3 = Proficient Skills (Solid and consistent understanding of learning target)

2 = Basic Skills (Developing understanding, inconsistent performance)

1 = Minimal Skills (Knowledge/skill just emerging, struggling to show comprehension)

0 = Not enough evidence to make a judgment of performance

2. What if students don't do their work? Shouldn't they be given a “0”?

If students do not complete an assignment or an assessment, a teacher can assign a “0” or give the student an “incomplete”. When we used a 100 point grading scale, one “0” mark during a quarter or semester could potentially ruin a student's chances at passing a class. In a 5 point scale, the student can work hard, make improvements and receive a passing grade. Motivation to stay engaged and keep trying is fostered using a 5 point scale but is squelched when using a 100 point scale. We value

learning and doing the work so much that we want to hold our students accountable for completing what has been assigned. Not completing assignments or turning in work of very low quality should not be accepted or tolerated. We want to do everything we can to encourage our students to stay engaged, to keep trying even when the learning is challenging (something our university and business partners tell us our students do not do well), and complete their work so that they can increase their knowledge and skills.

3. What is not changing in how teachers currently assess and grade student work?

As has been the practice in the past, students will continue to receive letter grades at the end of a marking period (quarter/semester). The individual numeric marks that are given throughout the marking period will combine and be converted into a letter grade. In addition, these letter grades will be used to calculate Grade Point Average (GPA) at the high school level only and we will continue to use a class rank system at the high school only.

These practices are currently under review and consideration for future implementation. Several prominent districts around us have moved away or are planning to move away from a class ranking system. We will be studying these districts and others as we continue to review our policies and practices.

4. What role does homework play in a student's grades?

Homework is viewed as practice – an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in new concepts and skills. Because we know students learn at different rates and in different ways and we don't want to penalize students for the learning they do along the way, homework will count for no more than 10% of a student's overall grade. Our teachers are being asked to make sure the homework that is assigned is directly linked to grade level or course learning targets. These assignments are "formative" in nature. They occur during the learning process and help our students gain a better understanding of the skills and concepts and also of themselves as learners. Our teachers will provide consistent feedback to students about their performance on homework or practice assignments. We still deeply value students working at home on course material. This is not a move away from or a devaluing of hard work and effort. We simply do not want to penalize students who may struggle with a concept or skill

at the beginning of a semester when they eventually can show mastery later.

The remaining 90% or more of a student's final grade will reflect how they perform on summative assessments – those opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of the learning targets covered. Again, these are not simply paper/pencil or rote memorization tasks in every case. Students will be given a variety of ways to demonstrate their understanding and mastery.

5. What do colleges and universities and business partners think of these changes in our assessment and grading practices?

We have spoken directly to representatives from UW-Madison, Carroll University, Cardinal Stritch University, UW-Milwaukee, Marquette WCTC, MATC and Alverno College. They applaud these changes. They have been communicating to us for the past several years that many of our students do not come to them as freshmen with the adequate knowledge and skills to be successful in college. Our business partners are giving us the same feedback about the students they are hiring right after they graduate from our schools, that some lack the skills and knowledge to be successful in the world of work.

We are taking this feedback very seriously. We are trying to heighten accountability for our teachers for rigorous and personalized instruction, and for our students in developing a strong awareness of themselves as learners so that they can learn as much as possible while they are with us.

6. What empirical evidence are you using to substantiate the need for these changes? How will you know if they are working?

We examine a variety of student achievement data indicators every year. We look at how our students are performing on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE), we compare GPA to ACT score, and we study outcome data to learn how our graduates perform on college entrance examinations. We know that many of our students who attend UW-system colleges need to take remedial courses as freshmen because they do not perform well on college entrance examinations. We know that many of our students who take the ACT (approximately 70% of our students eligible to take the test actually do and we hope to encourage many more in the future) don't perform at a level that indicates college readiness.

The ACT tests in four major areas: College English Composition, College Algebra, College Social Science and College Biology. Of the students who took the ACT that graduated in 2010, the following scored at a level that indicates college readiness:

College English Composition	82%
College Algebra	57%
College Social Science	66%
College Biology	45%

Students who demonstrated college readiness in ALL FOUR areas tested:

37%

We know these results need to improve and we are taking responsibility, as a system, to see that they do. We believe that making qualitative improvements in our teaching and assessment methods will help more students demonstrate college readiness in all four areas that are assessed by the ACT. We further hope to encourage many more students to take the ACT. Some students may not wish to enter college immediately after they graduate from high school, however we know that many working adults eventually see a reason and need to enter a two or four-year institution later in life. College readiness is a goal for all students in the 21st century. The ability to make choices as an adult and to have as many doors open for our students in the future is our biggest hope.

We are fortunate to see our district ACT composite increase again this year, particularly at a time when the overall state average decreased. This suggests to us that we are on the right track with our instructional philosophy and approach.

7. How will students learn about and understand these changes and the rationale behind them?

Each school will be working directly with students and families so that information about these changes is provided. We realize this is a change and that change itself can be hard for some. We sincerely appreciate your support as we implement these practices. Please call your building

principal if you have further questions or wish to discuss any aspects of our assessment and grading work.

We also appreciate your patience as teachers implement. These practices have been unfolding in classrooms for the past few years. This is now a district wide expectation. West High School implemented fully as a school during the 2009-2010 school year. We have learned a great deal from their work and their teachers have graciously assisted others as the rest of the district prepares to implement this school year. Our elementary schools are just beginning to discuss and plan for implementation, though many of these practices have long been considered “best practice” in elementary classrooms for decades.

In closing...

We have spent years studying and planning for these important enhancements in our teaching, assessment and grading practices. We have your student's best interests at the very heart of this work.