



# Millis Middle School Standards - Based Grading Frequently Asked Questions

*“Setting specific goals for student achievement and then tracking progress regarding those goals is one of the most powerful actions a teacher, school, or district can take.”*     -Robert Marzano

**Q. What is the difference between traditional grading practices with letter grades and our current Standards-Based Grading system?**

A. Standards-based grading is a different way of reporting on a child’s learning in a more detailed, accurate and objective way, by no longer using averages. Students are expected to master each standard by the end of a trimester or the end of the year, as shown on the report card by a progress descriptor of 3.

Traditional Grading System	Standards-Based Grading System
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students focus on the grades. They may not know what the learning targets are, but that they need to get a certain percentage right on a test.</li> <li>2. A grade is given for the assessment (quiz, test, homework, project, assignment, etc.) not the standard. One grade is given, although multiple standards may be measured.</li> <li>3. Final grades include an uncertain mix of assessment, achievement, effort, and behavior. There may be late penalties and extra credit, which also average into the final grade.</li> <li>4. Many things go in the grade book - regardless of purpose (bringing back a signed permission slip, etc.)</li> <li>5. Every score is included in a final grade, no matter when it was collected. The average is reported based on all work, not the student’s best work or final evidence of learning.</li> <li>6. Several students may have the same average obtained in different ways, but they do not have similar levels of mastery.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students focus on learning targets (curriculum standards) and what they need to know and be able to do to demonstrate they have mastered them.</li> <li>2. One rating is attached directly to each of the standards being measured rather than to the overall assignment or assessment.</li> <li>3. Effort and behavior are reported on separately. Students may redo assignments and retake assessments within reason after extra practice.</li> <li>4. Students are given an assessment to demonstrate mastery when the teacher expects they should be ready. Tests, quizzes, projects, and performance tasks are used for grading purposes.</li> <li>5. The most recent work that gives evidence of learning is reported on the report card, instead of averaging over time.</li> <li>6. Progress descriptor reports are more personalized and show what each individual student knows and can do.</li> </ol>

Adapted from O’Connor K (2002). *How to Grade for Learning: Linking grades to standards (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Q. Why did Millis switch to a grading system with Standards-Based Report Cards? Letter grades, points, and averages have been used for a long time. What is the reasoning behind the change?**

A. The purpose of any report card is to provide information on exactly what students know and can do at a given moment in time. Research shows that traditional grading systems are ineffective in accurately portraying student learning and growth over time. There is little evidence to support that letter grades and percentages are accurate measures of learning. Millis Middle School is trying to do a better job of measuring and reporting out student progress. The standards specifically say what knowledge and skills students should be learning. The report card shows a rating for each standard, which communicates the level of learning at that time in more detail. We are more closely matching curriculum standards with what is reported to parents and students.

**Q. What do you mean by standards-based?**

A. Standards are statements of critical content and skills that students will be learning. They come from the MA Curriculum Frameworks. The learning goals that Millis has identified as most essential to a particular grade level, content area, or course are called Power Standards. Other standards may also be taught, but specific progress toward each of the individual Power Standards is what is reported on the report card.

**Q. Do the students have a deep understanding of the standards on which they are being assessed? Do they know what they are supposed to be learning?**

A. It is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that curriculum standards are communicated in "kid friendly" language and students know them. Students need to know what they are expected to learn and how they can demonstrate that they learned it. In Millis, teachers are beginning to involve students in developing a learning path and in choosing how they can best show what they have learned.

**Q. How do teachers know if a student has mastered a standard?**

A. They create authentic measures of the learning expectations of the standard. Teachers may use written assignments, projects, performance tasks, interviews and conferences, or traditional tests and quizzes that directly assess the standard.

**Q. How does a teacher decide what mastery looks like?**

A. Teachers of the same grade level and across grade levels engage in conversations about what constitutes mastery. Teachers work in teams to define exactly what students need to know and do to show mastery. They clearly explain what constitutes mastery on Proficiency Scale sheets, which they use to assess student work.

**Q. What is a Proficiency Scale?**

A. Teachers create a rubric or rating guide called a Proficiency Scale. For each and every standard, teachers have defined exactly what students must demonstrate through their work and classroom performance that shows their progress at different levels of learning (Progress descriptors 1-4).

**Q. What is a Progress Descriptor?**

A. These are the ratings 1-4 that students will receive on assignments, tests, and on the report card attached to each standard. (1= not meeting 2 = progressing 3= meeting 4 = exceeding) Note that these are the same descriptors that are now used to report results of the MCAS.

**Q. How do students know what ratings they can earn on an assignment?**

A. The teacher will clearly communicate the focus and level of learning that is taking place and being assessed. Some assessments, projects, or assignments may give students the opportunity to exceed the standards if they are ready to do so. It is important to note that we want students to focus on their growth and learning, rather than on the ratings.

**Q. How do students know if they are on track? How do children know where they stand without letter grades?**

A. Progress descriptors (1-4) and specific feedback tell students where they are on a continuum of learning. Teachers give both verbal and written feedback to students to help them know where they stand. Feedback is often given on a rubric attached to an assignment or assessment. We know that specific feedback is important to communicate the steps necessary for improvement and growth, especially if a student is working at a level below mastery. Teachers also share their proficiency scales and examples of work at each level so students can compare their performance to the scale and exemplars and know where they stand.

**Q. If my child earns all 3's does that mean they are "just average?"**

A. No. It means they have met the learning goals and are right where they should be. There is no "average" in a standards-based system. You've met the standard or you haven't. There is only reporting on what level of learning has occurred. This system does not identify "good students" vs "bad students," nor does it compare them to one another.

**Q. My child says he/she can only earn a 3 so why try any harder?**

A. A 3 is what students should be striving for first. There may be some occasions when a teacher will say they are assessing only at the mastery level - in this case your child may be right. The focus for the teacher at that moment is mastery level. At another time there may be a chance to show that they can exceed the standard.

**Q. My child thinks earning a 2 is bad. Is it?**

A. No, and we could use your help in changing that mindset! Earning a 2 means the student is working toward mastery and is not there YET. They may just need a little extra support now and then, or they may be working on building blocks to get them to mastery level. Encourage them to keep working!

**Q. What if my child's report card has mostly 1s and 2s? Should I be worried?**

A. In this case, it is likely you have already been in contact with the teachers and we have put supports in place for your child. If teachers have concerns about your child's learning, they will reach out. If you have concerns at any time, please reach out to us!

**Q. How do you push students to demonstrate learning that exceeds mastery of the standard?**

A. We encourage all students to have a growth mindset. No matter their level of learning, they can always go deeper and achieve at a higher level. Students should always ask themselves, "What can I do better?" We communicate this message every day. At home, you can help your child answer the questions, "Where are you in relation to the standard?" "Where are you going from here?" and "How will you get there?"

**Q. How would my child earn a rating of 4?**

A. It depends on the standard. It could be by demonstrating additional content knowledge. It could be by demonstrating the ability to apply a skill in a more complicated situation. It could be initiated by your child, who takes the initiative to show deeper learning. It could be encouraged by the teacher who recognizes that deeper understanding exists and strengthens the opportunity for learning.

**Q. Can students always have an opportunity to demonstrate that they have exceeded mastery and earn a 4 by the end of the term or the end of the year?**

A. Generally, yes, there will likely be opportunities at some point for students to demonstrate deeper learning or apply skills in more complicated situations. This is easier to do on some standards than on others.

**Q. How do I know if my child is being challenged?**

A. Some of our most capable learners are enjoying the new system because it leads to more differentiation and opportunities for extension of course standards. Personalization is our common practice, and we are continuing to develop more and more personalized pathways for students who are ready for greater challenge. If you have a question about this, contact your child's teacher.

**Q. If a child earns a 3 or 4 earlier in the year, can they then earn a 2 later in the year on the same Standard?**

A. An asterisk will be noted on standards that are graded all year long, however the content is unique to one trimester or if the standard represents a skill that builds as the year goes on. For these, we want to be able to report that students are where they are expected to be for that trimester by showing a mastery level of 3. When the content or skill level becomes more challenging during the next trimester it is possible that the rating could be different.

**Q. What happens if the report card show a 2 on a standard at the end of a Trimester? Does the student just move on without additional instruction or learning opportunities?**

A. We know that children learn at different rates, and some take longer than others to learn. If a child earns a 2, it just means they are not quite there YET. They may know the content and can perform the skill, but need a little bit of support at times. The class may move on to study a different topic, but there will be an additional opportunity for reteaching, redoing assignments, and/or retaking assessments to demonstrate growth later on. The Standards-Based Report card is a living document, therefore the teacher may change the rating on the next report card if the child demonstrates mastery later in the year. Look for a comment in the Comment Section to explain that.

**Q. What happens if the report card shows a 1 or 2 on a standard at the end of the year? Then what?**

A. Depending upon the standard and the number of 2 ratings, the student may be asked to take a summer school class, attend summer tutoring, or complete summer work of some sort. Teachers will always be in ongoing communication with parents of a child early in the year if we anticipate this might be the case. It is important to note that some students may be working on entry level standards, or a subset of standards below grade level and therefore they may be seeing 2s on their report card.

Parents of any child who consistently demonstrates difficulty completing assignments or mastering skills or content will be contacted by the teacher as soon as this becomes apparent, and appropriate supports will be put in place using our District Curriculum Accommodation Plan.

**Q. It seems like sometimes work of different quality can earn the same rating, why is that? Students see others earning the same rating and their work is not as “good.”**

A. Different students may show mastery of standards in different ways. Effort and quality of work are reported on separately from mastery of content and skills. Messy work can potentially still be accurate work. Some students may need to improve in the area of learner expectations and teachers recognize that.

**Q. How do you motivate students using Standards-Based Grading?**

A. Research shows that motivation for learning comes from relationships, tapping into interests and passions, and just the right level of challenge. While some students feel rewarded by grades, we don't believe grades alone motivate students to learn. We hope that students will focus more on what they have learned than on the grade, and teachers will be encouraging them to do that.

**Q. You want students to focus more on learning and less on grades. Does less focus on grades mean the curriculum is less rigorous or that expectations for students are lower?**

A. Quite the opposite. This system puts a clear focus on what students must know and do. Our teachers have engaged in deep discussions about what they will accept for mastery of a standard. These conversations have made our expectations more explicit. We expect all students to master or exceed the standards, given quality instruction and learning opportunities. Lessons and assessments are more targeted and focused than ever, and it actually raises the bar for students. We have not changed our curriculum or our high expectations, we are simply changing the way we report out to students and parents.

**Q. Why aren't effort, attendance, preparation, and quality of work rewarded?**

A. They are! This is a common misconception in Standards-Based Grading. These important components are still a part of the system, however they are reported on separately. Learner Expectations ratings of U (Usually), S (Sometimes), and R (Rarely) provide feedback on behaviors that support learning at a high level.

**Q. How do the number ratings correspond to letter grades?**

A. They don't. This is like comparing apples and oranges. One is based on percentages and average performance over time. The other is based on reporting out explicit level of mastery on a learning standard at a particular moment in time.

**Q. Without a letter grade, how do I know how my child is really doing? How do we know if he/she needs extra help and we should be concerned?**

A. Read the comments and feedback from the teacher on student work and report cards. Attend parent conferences or ask to meet with the team. If your child is consistently receiving a rating lower than expected, contact the teacher. Middle School teachers routinely meet with parents during their team time in the afternoon. Please contact the Team Leader to set up an appointment for a meeting.

**Q. Will we get a Progress Report midway through the trimester?**

A. Yes. This year parents will receive a midterm progress report. Parents will also have the opportunity to schedule afternoon or evening conferences in early November.

**Q. How do I use PowerSchool to see how my child is doing?**

A. When you log into the PowerSchool Parent Portal, you will see tabs at the top. Under the Grades/Attendance tab there will be a list of classes with teacher names. To the right will be a small letter i in brackets. Click on the [ i ] to see a list of assignments. Next to the assignment will be a notation (green check = collected, red triangle = late, orange square = missing) If the teacher has added a comment about the assignment, there will be a small blue letter C in a circle. Click on the C to read the comment.

Under the Standards/Grades tab there will be a list of classes. Click on the course name to open a list of learning standards for that class. A Progress Descriptor (1-4) follows the standard. This number is based on the three most recent ratings earned for that standard and tells where your child is at that particular moment in time. Unfortunately, our current portal does not show progress descriptors (1-4) attached to particular assignments. At this time, they are located only on the standards page. We are currently working to customize the view in our Powerschool Parent Portal so parents can better monitor their child's performance on a particular assignment. Please stay tuned!

**Q. I feel like it's difficult to get a grasp on how my child is doing in a class. With PowerSchool it's difficult to know if he's doing what he needs to, or is struggling, etc. And my child doesn't seem to know when I ask him. Can you give us suggestions on what to do?**

A. Middle School students are just beginning to develop independence and take ownership of their learning. Encourage your child to pay attention to what the learning target is in class and the feedback from the teacher. If you truly feel like you are in the dark, this is a good time to email the teacher. Most problems like this can be resolved with parent-teacher communication. Look for the symbol that tells whether assignments are completed or missing in PowerSchool and check the comments that the teacher adds to ratings.

**Q. How do I know if my child is actually learning what he/she should be learning and is where he/she should be?**

A. We measure learning against the specific standards. Teachers collect evidence of student learning over time. If that evidence shows mastery of a standard, then the rating is a 3, and a child is learning exactly as we expect them to learn. Any student who earns ratings of 3 or 4 is exactly where they should be. Note - there may be times when students who earn a 2 are exactly where they should be on a learning continuum as well. Look at the comments and feedback from the teacher and contact the teacher if you are unsure.

**Q. What happens when my child goes to high school or if my child transfers to another school?**

A. We hope all children will stay in the Millis Public Schools, however there are many, many schools in the state and the country that also use standards-based grading. A transcript follows your child and explains our grading system. Schools around the state and country are equipped to understand and interpret many different kinds of grading systems. Children from schools that use this type of grading system are not at a disadvantage.

**Q. How will this have an impact on our children?**

A. Quality assessment practices, aligned curriculum, increased rigor, descriptive feedback, clearly articulated standards, and assessment for learning will only benefit our students. In fact, we think this practice will develop increased independence and ownership for learning over time.

**Q. Does this kind of grading help students be prepared for college?**

A. Identifying one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner, being self-motivated to meet course objectives, setting goals, developing strong study habits, and mastering course standards are all aspects of this system that will help students be successful if they choose to go to college.

**Q. Will Millis High School be using standards-based grading when my child gets there?**

A. At this time there are no plans to extend standards-based report cards to the high school. Millis High School teachers are, however, working to better align their teaching and assessments to high school level curriculum standards to improve learning.

## **Resources to learn more (these links will be active on the document on our website):**

### **Standards-Based Grading Articles, Literature, and Research**

- Anderson, J. (2017) [One School's Strategy to Raise Empathetic and Self-motivated Citizens: Ditch Grades](#)
- Bostic, K. (2012) [Standards based grading in the middle school](#), *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*
- Durm, M. (1993) [An A is not an A is not an A: A history of grading](#). *The Educational Forum*
- Erickson, J.A. (2011) [A call to action: Transforming grading practices](#). *Principal Leadership*
- Erickson, J.A. (2011) [How grading reform changed our school](#). *Educational Leadership*
- Guskey, T.R. (1994) [Making the grade: what benefits students?](#). *Educational Leadership*
- Marzano, R.J., & Heflebower, T. (2011) [Grades that show what students know](#). *Educational Leadership*
- O'Connor, K. (2017) [A case for standards-based grading and reporting](#). *School Administrator*
- Reeves, D., Jung, L. A., & O'Connor, K. (2017) [What's worth fighting against in grading?](#) *Educational Leadership*
- Wormeli, R. (2017) [We have to prepare students for the next level, don't we?](#) *Association for Middle Level Education Magazine*
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### **Articles related to Standards-based Grading and Higher Education**

- NESSC (2017) [How Colleges View Proficiency Based Transcripts](#). *NESSC Briefing NO16 College Admissions Know More*
- Sturgis, C. (2018) [Grades, College Admission, and Competency Based Education](#). *CompetencyWorks*
- Buckmiller, T., & Peters, R.. (2018). [Getting a fair shot?](#). *School Administrator*