



# Student Guide to the DMPS Grading Practices

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Think. Learn. **Grow.**

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Additional resources and information may be found at <http://grading.dmschools.org>

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# Purpose of this Student Guide

*Hello, DMPS students.*

The purpose of this booklet is to help you better understand what SRG (standards-referenced grading) is about. You have been learning and achieving in your classrooms with teachers using SRG practices for a while now, but it's time to clarify many aspects of SRG. The Student Guide is also a great tool to help parents understand SRG.

This Student Guide is located in the [Student tab within the "DMPS Grading Practices" website](#). It is ready for you to read or refer to or download if you want. It is a public site.

The material in this Student Guide reflects what is found in the "DMPS Grading Practices Teacher Handbook." The teacher handbook is located in the Teacher tab of the district grading website found at <http://grading.dmschools.org>

This student guide *can* be used with the Teacher SRG Handbook; corresponding pages are noted in **red**.

Each section describes the major take-aways for each grading practice. These often have to do with the thinking behind the grading practice. This is followed by short explanations of different technical or practical aspects of the grading practice. We tried to clarify the *thinking* and the *doing* behind all the different parts of SRG.

## How to use this guide:

This guide is organized to make our grading practices easy to understand and simple to find. Below you will see the general layout of each page that includes the Grading Practice title, the big ideas from each practice, and then the "Small Stuff," or explanations that offer greater details.

Grading Practice \_\_\_\_:

This is the title of the grading practice.

### **BIG IDEAS:**

- Each of these bullets are the most important points for each practice.
- They provide a quick overview.

### **Small Stuff:**

*The small stuff includes a more detailed look at the big ideas from each grading practice. The small stuff sometimes includes scenarios or helpful charts or images. Somewhere in the small stuff (or elsewhere) will be a reference to the page from the teacher handbook, [which is found HERE](#). So when you see **a page reference in red** within an explanation in this student guide, it is referring to the page in the teacher handbook.*

If you have any feedback on this student guide, please contact Dr. Becca Lindahl at [rebecca.lindahl@dmschools.org](mailto:rebecca.lindahl@dmschools.org) or [blindahl@heartlandaea.org](mailto:blindahl@heartlandaea.org)

## ***Explanation for the Summary (overview) section (pp. 3-4)***

### **BIG IDEAS:**

In 2012, the Des Moines Public Schools leaders argued that if standards-referenced grading were implemented well, there would be a stronger relationship between internal assessments (grades) and external outcomes (ACT & Advanced Placement exams). They discovered that many DMPS students who had 4.0 GPAs (grade point averages) nearing the end of high school were receiving 17 on their ACT scores. An ACT score of 17 is far below the average in Iowa (just under 22) and is not a particularly good score for acceptance into colleges and universities and not strong enough for scholarships. Yet those students were getting very high letter grades from their high school teachers.

DMPS decided, using a large task force of teachers and leaders, to study how to change grading methods. District leadership set a vision to study, read, investigate, train, and put in place new methods for teaching with standards to reflect an accurate assessment of learning.

### **Our Why**

We believe it is every child's civil right to be held to high expectations, regardless of zip code.

### **Core Belief**

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Des Moines Public Schools commits to all stakeholders to provide fair, accurate, specific, and timely information regarding student progress toward agreed-upon common standards as well as feedback for next steps and growth areas. Grades communicate what students know and can do.

<b>Fair</b>	The same work, by the same student, should receive the same grade, even if the teacher is different.
<b>Accurate</b>	Grades are based solely on achievement, which means other factors, like behavior and attendance, are not used to calculate a grade.
<b>Specific</b>	Grading policies should be so clear that students should be able to tell teachers what grade they have earned, even before the teacher calculates it.
<b>Timely</b>	Feedback to students is so timely that students can actually use that feedback, right away, to improve their performance on tests and assignments.

### **Grading Practices** that resulted from study, investigation, and learning:

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- 1) A consistent 4-point grading scale is used.
- 2) Academic achievement is reported separately from behaviors.
- 3) Scores are based on a body of evidence.
- 4) Achievement is organized and reported by learning topic. In secondary schools, topic scores are converted to a grade at semester's end.
- 5) Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.
- 6) Accommodations and modifications are provided for exceptional learners.

# Grading Practice 1:

## A consistent 4-point grading scale is used.

### BIG IDEAS:

- A scale with 4 points or levels is used rather than a traditional scale with 100 points/levels.
- 4-point scale has clear descriptors and language for the learning targets.
- Level 3 is the grade-level expectation as described in the standard.
- There's greater fairness\* to students.

### Small Stuff:

Through conversations, the Task Force decided that traditional scales with 100 points were focused on work completion, not on mastery of content. The purpose of the 4-point scale is to give clear feedback of your learning on a standard. No one can really describe the learning difference between a 73% and a 72% anyway.

*In addition, in an older, more traditional 100-point/level scale, the divisions usually run something like this*

90% - 100% = A
80% - 89% = B
70% - 79% = C
60% - 69% = D
59% and below = F

*59% down to 0% is a huge range. The divisions within this type of grading scale are unfair to you. As well, this scale tended to look at the amount of work done.*

*Compared to a 4-point/level scale (p. 5)*

Scale Score	Academic Descriptor	Student-Friendly Description
4	Exceeding Standard	I have demonstrated deep understanding that goes beyond the learning goal.
3	Meeting Standard	I have met the learning goal that's in the topic scale.
2	Developing Toward Standard	I have foundational skills and knowledge for the learning goal and I am almost there.
1	Insufficient Progress	The evidence that I've submitted shows I have a long way to go to reach the learning goal.
0	No evidence of student understanding in submitted work	In work I've submitted, I haven't yet shown I understand the learning.
M	Missing—student has not submitted evidence	I have not yet submitted evidence of learning for the learning goal.

*The ranges here are equal. This is fairer to you.*

In our 4-point/level scales (p. 5), Level 3 is considered the level teachers and students are aiming at. It represents proficiency: "Yes! This shows mastery of the standard(s) at grade level." All teachers in the district are working to get all students to reach Level 3 with each scale they work on. In addition, you should be finding that many teachers offer different kinds of work in order to challenge you if you want or need that challenge. Teachers push you to reach Level 4, which reflects more cognitive complexity and deeper understanding.

\* "Fairness": The same work, by the same student, should receive the same grade, even if the teacher is different. (See p. 4 in Student Guide)

# Grading Practice 2:

## Academic achievement is reported separately from behavior.

### BIG IDEAS:

- When effort or behavior gets mixed with learning into a grade, it is hard to tell what you actually know and can do with your learning.
- Grades should reflect how deeply you have learned course content.
- How we interact with other people is still an important part of learning. So important that it needs to be reported separately.

Both learning and behavior are so important that they each get a separate reporting method. This ensures that the academic grade reflects only learning and not behaviors or work completion. [See p. 8.](#)

### Consider these scenarios...

***Maybe you know Matt.*** He works very hard in class. does all his homework for practice, raises his hand, offers to run errands for the teacher, and gets along with his classmates. However, when he turns in evidence of his learning it's obvious he struggles with the learning targets. He comes in for help, but he still has some difficulties expressing his understanding of the concepts and skills.

Are Matt's behaviors important? Yes, absolutely.

Should Matt receive a good grade at the end of the semester *because* he's well-behaved? No.

Matt needs to show mastery of the concepts and skills in the scales. If Matt gets credit for completing work and not for mastery, a teacher is doing Matt no favors. He may struggle later in future classes because he is misplaced or may actually need extra instruction or relearning first. Because his good behavior is valued, it is noted separately.

***You probably know Linda.*** Linda listens some of the time in class, finishes work quickly, talks to classmates at inappropriate times, and is sometimes rude. She tells her parents she is bored in classes. When she turns in evidence of her learning it's obvious she mastered the learning targets. She doesn't need extra help.

Are Linda's behaviors important? Yes, absolutely.

Should Linda receive a low grade at the end of the semester *because* she's rude? No.

In both Linda's and Matt's cases, the DMPS Citizenship and Employability Skills Rubric (CER) reports behaviors. The CER not included in the student's GPA. The letter grades on a report card that appear for each course at the end of a semester reflect academic achievement.

# Grading Practice 3: Scores are based on a body of evidence.

## BIG IDEAS:

- A “body of evidence” is a collection of pieces of evidence that you can show to demonstrate understanding of the learning targets in Level 3.
- Our purpose in collecting a body of evidence is to allow teachers to determine a defensible and credible topic score based on a representation of student learning.
- You must demonstrate your learning in every topic in order to pass a course.
- Teachers use evidence to track your learning. You can track your learning as well.

## Small Stuff (pp. 13-14):

- Our purpose in collecting a body of evidence is to:
  - Allow teachers to determine a defensible and credible topic score based on a representation of student learning.
  - Clearly communicate where a student’s learning is based on a topic scale to inform instructional decisions and push student growth.
  - Show student learning of Level 3 targets through multiple and varying points of data (See Grading Practice 5).
  - Provide opportunities for feedback between student and teacher.

The quantity of evidence does not increase a grade automatically. You might provide pieces of evidence like a quiz, a little reflection on some learning, a bigger test, a paper, a project, or another task of some kind.

## Scoring

A “learning target” is a statement that explains what you should know and comes from a standard. There are typically multiple learning targets in Level 3 on a topic scale.

Because of the clear descriptors in each of the levels of a scale, the teacher looks at the evidence you provide against the descriptors on the scale to enter a topic score. Remember that scores show a progression of learning and change with your growth over time.

## Insufficient Evidence

F/IE You must provide evidence for every topic in order to pass a course. If you do not provide enough evidence by the end of the semester (and it would be reasonable for you to submit it in two weeks), the teacher will assign a semester grade of F/IE—Failing due to Insufficient Evidence. You have two weeks after the close of the semester to provide the needed evidence before the grade converts to an F for the semester.

## Infinite Campus

If parents and students are interested in seeing what Infinite Campus might look like, refer to [pages 15, 18, 19, 20](#).

## Finally:

Teachers use standards-referenced scales to assess student evidence. Students have multiple opportunities to create or provide evidence of learning.

# Grading Practice 4:

## Achievement is organized and reported by learning topic. In secondary schools, topic scores are converted to a grade at semester's end.

### BIG IDEAS:

- Your teacher records your learning progress on each topic by having you focus on specific learning targets and offer evidence of having learned those.
- Letter grades are used for your report cards and for high school transcripts to succinctly communicate your academic achievement at the end of the semester. GPA is still used.
- Your teachers and building principals need to establish deadlines for the evidence you turn in. Procrastination is painful because it makes more work later, and then you might not be able to take advantage of all opportunities. *Take advantage of all learning opportunities.*
- You will shine if you do this: Focus on learning, not on a letter grade.

### Small stuff (p. 21):

Until recently, teachers collected every assignment and counted them towards the grade. Now teachers record your learning progress on each topic by assessing specific learning targets (day-to-day instructional bulls-eyes). This means scores are not entered as frequently.

DMPS high schools convert all final scores into a GPA (grade point average) because colleges and universities and scholarship committees require it. Colleges and universities throughout the midwest prefer GPAs that accurately reflect your academic ability.

### A note of new learning for many:

In the past, every single assignment received points and a letter grade right away. Now, we want to acknowledge that learning is continuous, and it is not necessary to monitor grades every day. *You're encouraged to focus on your learning and progress instead of focusing on a daily letter grade.*

Think about this... What's more meaningful in the bigger picture? Let's say you visit the doctor for a physical exam and have a discussion about your health. After your visit, you receive a letter in the mail with the results. Looking at the examples below, which is more helpful to you?

<p><b>Health check:</b> Grade of B <b>Comment:</b> You're doing pretty well.</p>	<p><b>OR</b></p>	<p><b>Health check:</b> Grade of B <b>Comment:</b> Your health check is determined by these four factors:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="621 1549 1458 1719"> <tr> <td>Nutrition:</td> <td>3</td> <td><i>meeting goal</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Lowering cholesterol:</td> <td>4</td> <td><i>exceeding goal</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Reducing blood pressure:</td> <td>3</td> <td><i>meeting goal</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Exercise:</td> <td>1</td> <td><i>insufficient progress to goal</i></td> </tr> </table>	Nutrition:	3	<i>meeting goal</i>	Lowering cholesterol:	4	<i>exceeding goal</i>	Reducing blood pressure:	3	<i>meeting goal</i>	Exercise:	1	<i>insufficient progress to goal</i>
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Reducing blood pressure:	3	<i>meeting goal</i>												
Exercise:	1	<i>insufficient progress to goal</i>												

This helps you learn how to track your learning progress and how to engage with teachers about what to do to improve. This will help you in the long run establish the practice of monitoring your personal progress instead of focusing on a letter grade every day.

# Grading Practice 5: Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.

## BIG IDEAS:

- The whole point of education is to learn. Different learners deserve different ways to demonstrate learning and sometimes in slightly different time frames.
- There's more than just redos and retakes for you to reshow what you know about learning targets.
- Teachers often incorporate previous learning in new content to provide multiple opportunities for you to demonstrate your learning, ideas, and skills as outlined in learning targets.
- There is a cycle of learning (p. 22) that moves from instruction through practice and feedback and keeping on track with the learning targets. There's assessment of learning.
- There are deadlines for students to follow—some cut-off dates for multiple opportunities (p. 23).

### *Small stuff:*

*In reviewing our teaching practices, we are trying to change the mindset **from this:***

Teach Teach Teach Teach TEST Enter a grade in gradebook. Move on. Teach Teach Teach.....TEST Enter a grade in gradebook. Move on.  
And so on..... Throughout the entire semester.....

### *To this:*

Clear learning targets and scales provide insight into student progress. Teachers plan their lessons with student learning goals in mind. They know it's best to teach and provide practice that is not scored in order to provide meaningful feedback during the learning process.

Imagine you've provided several pieces of evidence for Learning Targets 2 and 3. Your teacher is confident that you have mastered Learning Target 2 but not 3 yet. Instead of focusing on redoing Target 3, the teacher continues to the next topic knowing additional opportunities to address Target 3 will be provided. Another opportunity to demonstrate learning for this target is built into the teacher's planning.

Often it's better to keep moving forward and adding to your understanding. Teachers often incorporate previous learning in new content to provide multiple opportunities for you to demonstrate your ongoing development of these ideas and skills. Teachers *can* also allow you to redo assignments, but that's not always the best for growth.

Explanation of the "Planning for Multiple Opportunities in the Instructional Cycle" chart, p. 24:

### *Biggest take-aways in the chart:*

- Teachers plan for, instruct, and assess all within Cycle 1.
- You willingly engage in the learning in Cycle 1. ("Willingly engage" means you do the in-class practice work and homework assignments; participate in class discussions, assignments, tasks, and projects; and take the assessments the teacher gives when they're scheduled.)
- If you have engaged in the learning in Cycle 1 but your evidence is not showing a score you'd like to receive, **take responsibility and ask the teacher** if you can engage in some sort of other opportunity for learning or in reassessment of some kind, found in Cycle 2. Cycle 2 is entered into by *your* request.
- You are not guaranteed access to Cycle 2 if you haven't willingly engaged in Cycle 1.
- Teachers offer both cycles; how teachers engage in the cycles can vary.

# Grading Practice 6: Accommodations and modifications are provided for exceptional learners.

## **BIG IDEAS:**

- There are all kinds of students. “Exceptional learners” might be those with learning disabilities, those who are learning English (ELs), and those identified Gifted and Talented.
- All learners deserve to learn and grow in their learning.
- There are two kinds of “changes” teachers can make for exceptional learners: accommodations and modifications.
- Accommodations are made for lots of students. These can help a great many students to demonstrate meeting Level 3 of a topic scale. Teachers can and should make these accommodations on their own.
- Modifications are very rare. They are made and agreed upon only by a team of educators when determined it’s appropriate for a standard to be changed for a student.

## **Small stuff:**

*Helpful explanations for you (pp. 26-29):*

**Exceptional learners:** these are students with IEPs (individual educational plan) or a 504 plan, or EL students (English Learners), or Gifted and Talented students.

**Accommodations:** These are changes or adaptations in how we teach you to meet your individual learning needs. Accommodations do not change the learning standard. Some examples of accommodations are possibly extending testing time because of a reading challenge or needing a support device. Another example would be providing a separate new task to you if you clearly need an academic challenge because of your abilities.

**Modifications:** These are changes in the content in a course or in assessment (a change in the standard of learning) based on recommendations from a student’s educational team (often a counselor, teachers, sometimes principal, others). A single teacher cannot individually decide to change a standard for a student.

Much of the rest of Grading Practice 6 (pp. 30-34) has to do with specific instructions, clarifications, or information regarding students on individualized educational programs (IEPs).