



Competency-Based Grading in High Schools

Strategies for Implementation

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Pilot competency-based grading in select high school courses before conducting school-wide implementation to collect feedback and improve the grading system. Transitioning to competency-based grading at the high school level requires adjustments to curriculum, pedagogy, and the online gradebook. Due to the extent of these modifications, all profiled districts experienced some challenges during the pilot period. Administrators at profiled districts collected feedback from teachers, parents, and students about how to address these challenges and made adjustments before expanding implementation. For example, due to teacher feedback during the pilot process, **District B** adjusted its online grading system and **District C** altered its grading scale.

Contacts at all profiled districts identify their online grading system as an ongoing challenge during implementation. District B and District D developed home-grown online grading systems for their transition to competency-based grading. Contacts at both districts note that administrators felt commercial options were not flexible enough to meet their teachers' needs. Their homegrown systems have required continuous improvement and District D recently decided to transition to a commercial option. Commercial online grading systems have posed challenges for **District A, District C, and District E**. These districts have recently transitioned or plan to transition to new vendors that administrators hope will better meet teachers' needs.

Administrators at District A, District B, and District D identify teacher-to-teacher discussion as the most effective form of professional learning on competency-based grading. District A and District D allocate time during professional learning periods for teachers to discuss the new grading system. Contacts note that these discussions permit teachers to grapple with some of their concerns about competency-based grading and learn from each other in ways that traditional professional learning sessions often do not allow. Administrators at **District B** also note that teacher-to-teacher discussion on competency-based grading led to increased teacher buy-in.

To secure parent buy-in for competency-based grading, communicate information about the grading system at multiple times and through both in-person and written channels. District A and District E held a series of district-wide and school-specific meetings to educate parents about competency-based grading, explain the motivation for the change, and answer questions. Contacts recommend that administrators repeat information about the grading system across multiple meetings and allow teachers to provide their perspective on the grading system. To supplement in-person meetings, each profiled district published and distributed a parent guide on competency-based grading or an FAQ sheet. Include information that addresses common parent concerns within written materials (e.g., impact on college admissions, role of homework).

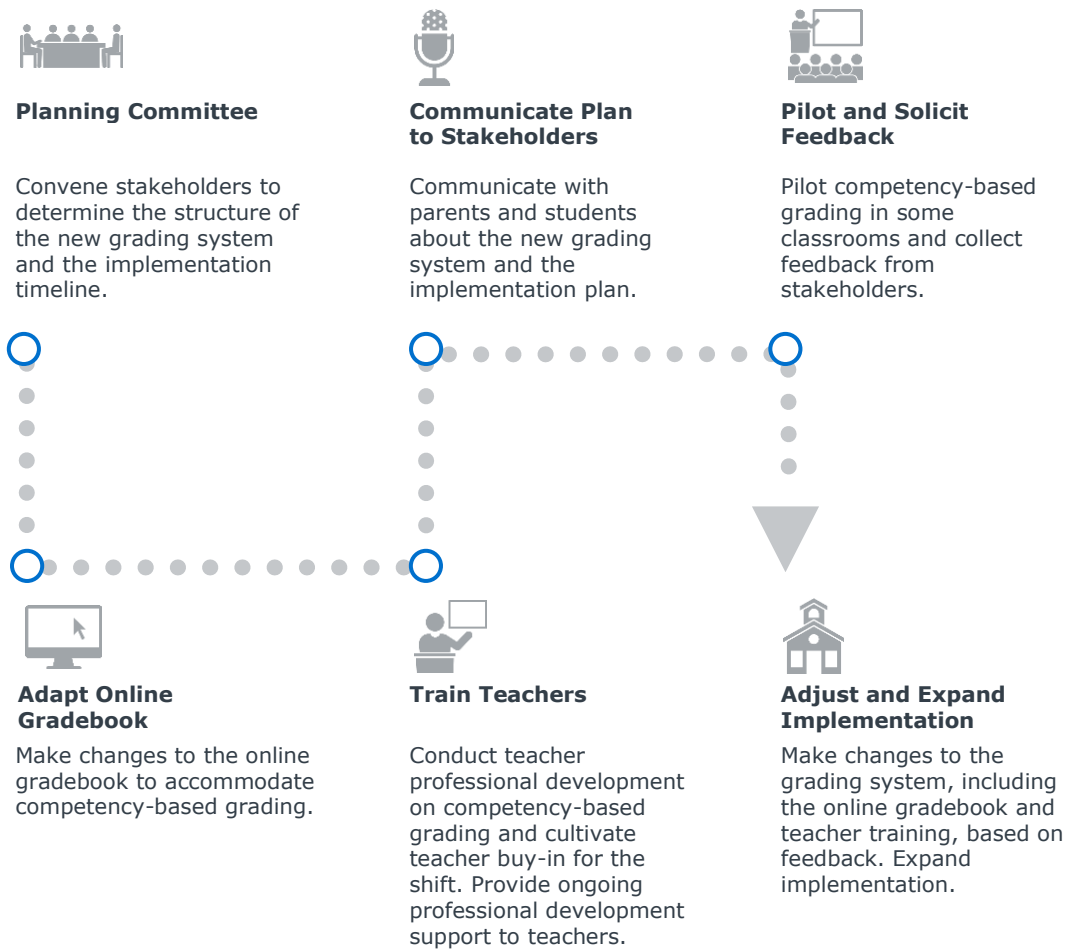
2) Implementation Process

Crafting an Implementation Plan

Utilize a Stepped Process to Implement Competency-Based Grading

Each profiled district followed a unique process to implement competency-based grading. Despite these differences, all profiled districts gradually introduced or plan to gradually introduce competency-based grading into high school classrooms. Districts note that a gradual implementation can mitigate pushback, limit the extent of simultaneous change, and allow for constant adjustments and improvements to the competency-based grading system.

Key Steps of the Competency-Based Grading Implementation Process at Profiled Districts



Implementation Process at *District B*



Planning (2013-2016)

The Assistant Superintendent formed a committee on grading, and included principals, teachers, union representatives, and administrators. The committee recommended the district move to competency-based grading and established a set of guiding principles for the district's grading philosophy.



Pilot (2016-2017)

Principals identified 50 teachers willing to beta-test competency-based grading in exchange for a financial incentive. Many of these teachers were already experimenting with alternative grading. During the first quarter, teachers informed administrators that they could not effectively pilot competency-based grading without a new online gradebook. The superintendent directed the information systems department to create a new online grade book. Nineteen teachers beta-tested this gradebook in the second quarter and provided frequent feedback to administrators on the system. In the third and fourth quarters, 15 additional teachers beta-tested the online gradebook and the district continued to adapt the system.



Expanded Pilot (2017-2018)

In the first quarter, 45 teachers implemented competency-based grading. By spring, 500 teachers voluntarily implemented competency-based grading in their courses. Teachers remained eligible for financial incentives to adopt competency-based grading.



Future Work

Competency-based grading will continue to be implemented on a voluntary basis, but the district will no longer offer financial incentives to teachers. The district expects almost all high school courses to use competency-based grading by the 2020-2021 school year.

The district allocated \$100,000 to financial incentives for teachers to adopt competency-based grading. The financial incentive system is as follows:

- \$1,000/teacher if the full school adopts
- \$800/teacher if all teachers in a grade adopt (e.g., all 9th grade teachers)
- \$700/teacher if all teachers of a single subject within a grade adopt (e.g., all 9th grade math teachers)
- \$600/teacher if an individual teacher adopts in all of his/her classes
- \$500/teacher if an individual teacher adopts in one of his/her classes

Implementation Process at *District E*



Planning (Spring-Summer 2014)

A group of middle school teachers reached out to the district for support in implementing competency-based grading, specifically in adapting the online grading system. District administrators decided to support competency-based grading across the district on a voluntary basis.



Training

2014-2015: Middle school language arts and math teachers received training in competency-based grading.

2015-2016: All remaining K-12 teachers received training in competency-based grading.



Middle School Implementation and High School Pilot (2016-2017)

Middle school teachers and a pilot group of high school teachers implemented competency-based grading in their classes. Any teacher at the high school level could volunteer to pilot competency-based grading. Some pilot teachers were not comfortable with the system and frustration developed among teachers, students, and parents. Mid-year, administrators decided to revert high school grading to traditional averaging.



High School Implementation (2017-2018)

Following additional teacher training, all ninth grade teachers implemented competency-based grading. However, most teachers use averages rather than trend lines to determine final grades.



Future Work

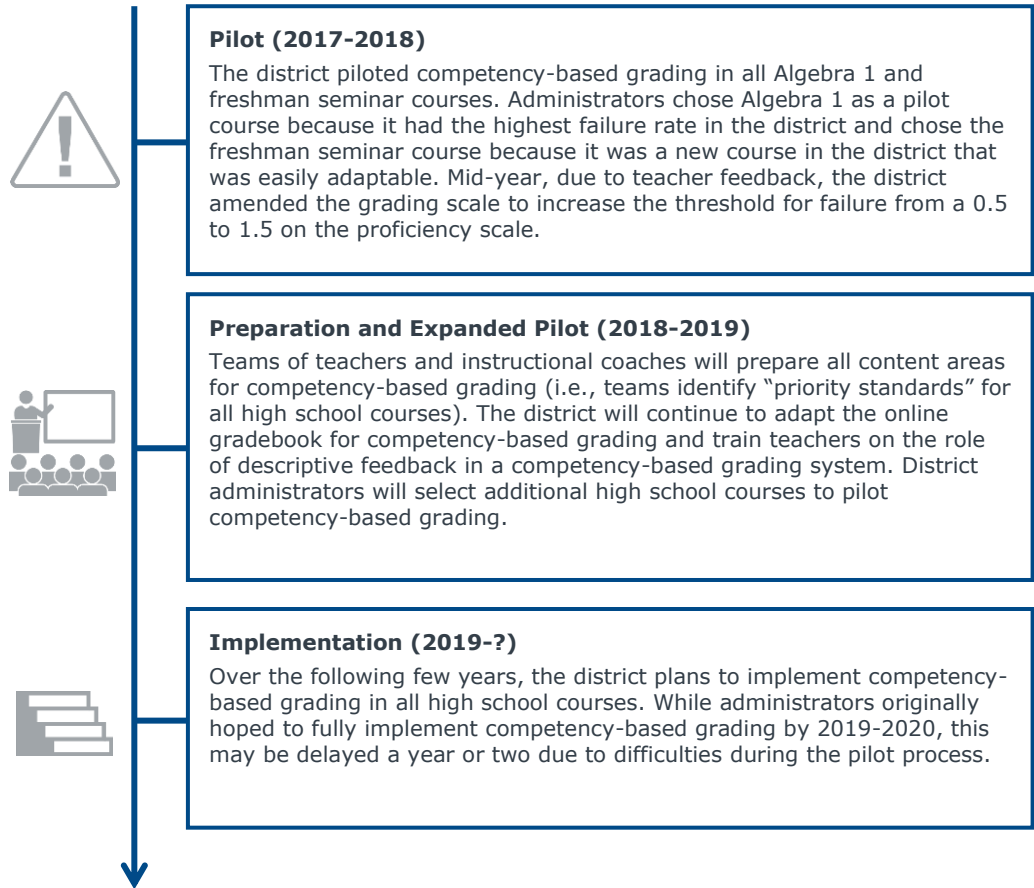
2018-2019: 10th grade teachers will implement competency-based grading.

2019-2020: 11th grade teachers will implement competency-based grading.

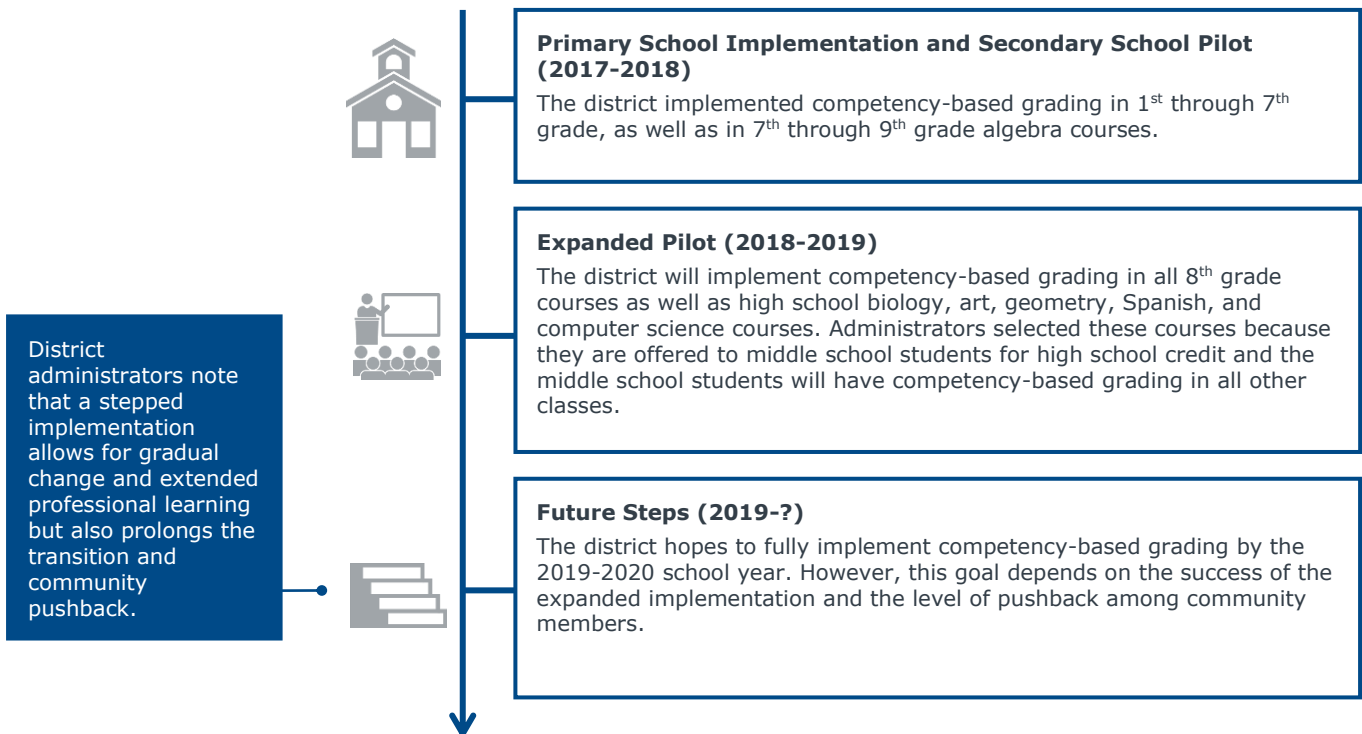
2020-2021: All high school teachers will implement competency-based grading.



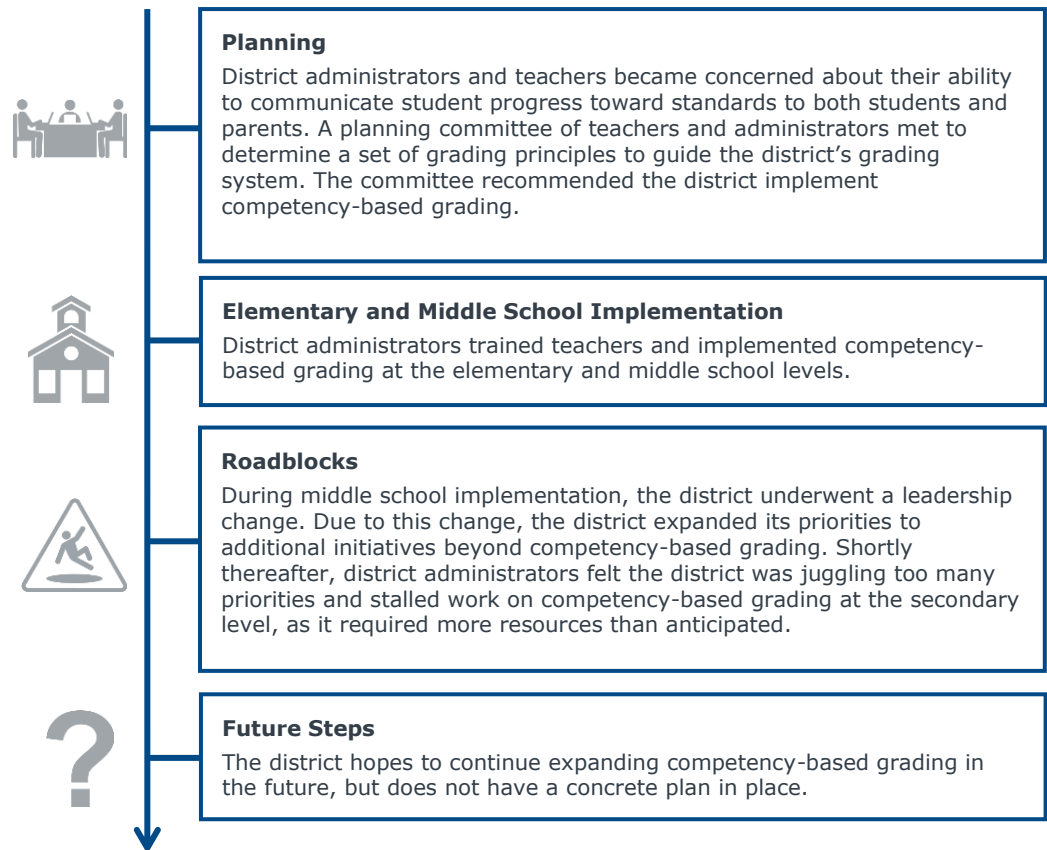
Implementation Process at *District C*



Implementation Process at *District A*



Implementation Process at *District D*



Teachers and Administrators Must Compromise to Determine Grade Scales and Calculations

Contacts at **District A**, **District C**, and **District E** identify grading scales as a point of contention during the competency-based grading implementation. At District A, middle and high school staff determined the grading scale. Determining how to convert proficiency scores into letter grades led to significant disagreement among staff. To mitigate this contention, administrators allow teachers some flexibility in determining how to calculate grades for their courses. While some teachers utilize decaying averages, others leverage a trend line in determining proficiency scores. District C and District E amended their grading scales and calculations mid-year when piloting competency-based grading in their high schools. At District E, teacher, parent, and student pushback against the use of trend lines in grade calculations led the district to allow teachers to use averaging in grade calculations. District C moved the threshold for failure from 0.5 to 1.5 on their four-point proficiency scale during a pilot year. Teacher feedback that students who progressed to the next level after receiving a 0.5 in a course would not be prepared to succeed prompted this change.

Determining Competencies

Most Profiled Districts Base Their Competency-Based Grading Systems on State Standards

Rather than crafting standards internally, **District B**, **District D**, and **District E** based their grading systems on state standards. In other words, teachers evaluate student mastery of state standards and award students with a proficiency score. At District D, district administrators created clusters of state standards in response to teacher feedback that there were too many state standards to teach and assess within one semester. The clusters allow teachers to focus on content themes rather than more granular standards. At District E, teachers base academic grades on state standards but base a discipline related grade on work-habit standards administrators and teachers developed.

When Basing the Grading System on Internally Defined Competencies, Dedicate Significant Time to the Process

At **District B**, contacts identify the large number of secondary school courses without state standards (e.g., art, CTE courses) as a challenge to furthering their competency-based grading implementation. Contacts anticipate administrators will dedicate significant teacher professional development time to determining competencies for these courses before continuing to implement the competency-based grading system.

Administrators at **District A** formed teams of teachers and instructional coaches to determine competencies for each high school course. The district uses these competencies as the basis for its grading system. Similarly, teams of teachers and instructional coaches determined competencies at **District C**. While these competencies largely correlate with state standards, they are customized to the district.

Contacts recommend that districts carefully construct competencies because the strength of the grading system depends on the strength of the competencies. Contacts found that the teams frequently compromise to determine essential learnings that focus on both skill development and content knowledge.

District A's Process for Determining Competencies

3 Years



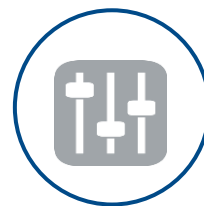
1

Teams of teachers and instructional coaches identify essential learnings and corresponding proficiency scales. Teams utilize [Marzano research](#) and templates.



2

Teachers shift instruction to focus on the essential learnings but continue traditional grading.



3

Teams adapt essential learnings based on feedback and teachers fully implement competency-based grading using revised essential learnings.

All Profiled Districts Identify Gradebook Adjustments as a Significant Challenge in the Implementation Process

Administrators at all profiled districts continue to face challenges using their district’s online grading systems for competency-based grading. Whether adapting a commercial system or developing a home-grown system, contacts recommend districts carefully consider the impact of competency-based grading on teacher and parent use of the online grading system.

Online Grading Systems Used by Profiled Districts

<p>District A</p>	<p>The district experienced difficulties adapting its online grading system to meet the needs of teachers using competency-based grading. Due to these difficulties and to support the continued implementation of competency-based grading, the district switched to a new student information system vendor, Synergy through Edupoint.</p>
<p>District B</p>	<p>The district beta-tested competency-based grading using a pre-existing gradebook. Halfway through the school year, the beta-testing teachers informed administrators that they could not effectively beta-test competency-based grading without significant changes to the online grading system. In response, the district adapted its home-grown online grading system by incorporating competencies and proficiency scales. Since then, feedback from beta-testing teachers has led to dozens of improvements to the system.</p>
<p>District C</p>	<p>Contacts identify the adaptation of the online grading system as the biggest challenge they have faced during the implementation process. While their vendor, Infinite Campus, has a “standards-based grading” option, the district found this option to be more difficult to use than an adapted version of the “traditional” option.</p>
<p>District D</p>	<p>The district initially developed a home-grown grading system because administrators did not feel commercial systems met the needs of teachers under a competency-based grading system. The district is currently transitioning to a commercial option, TeacherEase.</p>
<p>District E</p>	<p>Contacts identify lack of flexibility in their commercial grading system, Infinite Campus, as a challenge in implementing competency-based grading. Additionally, administrators identified their lack of knowledge about what changes to the system would be required for competency-based grading as a source of stress during the transition process. To support teacher understanding of competency-based grading, the district allows all teachers, even those not yet implementing competency-based grading, to view decaying averages in the online gradebook.</p>

3) Teacher Training and Communications

Training Mechanisms

Combine Initial Training Sessions with Ongoing Support to Encourage Intentional Implementation in Classrooms

Most districts combine initial, and typically more formal, training on competency-based grading with ongoing, and more casual, in-building support. Contacts at **District E** note that this combination allows the district to support the continued development of teachers and ensure that they appropriately implement competency-based grading into their classrooms. Contacts at **District A** recommend that districts allocate significant time to professional learning on competency-based grading. In their experience, teachers appreciate time to digest and discuss the new grading system over multiple professional learning sessions.



Consider Leveraging Resources from External Agencies to Support Professional Learning

Administrators at **District E** worked with a statewide partnership to support their professional learning program on competency-based grading. For example, the district applied for and received a grant to partially fund some professional learning activities.

Training Mechanisms Used by Profiled Districts

Initial Instruction:



Traditional Training

The Department of Teaching and Learning at **District C** and **District E** conducted initial training sessions with teachers before implementing competency-based grading. At District C, the department taught principals how to train teachers on the philosophical aspects of competency-based grading through a PowerPoint lecture. Principals then carried out the training at the school level.



Condensed "Camp" Training

District E developed a "camp" (i.e., a condensed program that occurs over a few days) to train teachers. The programming involves lectures, discussion periods, and workshops. While a summer session is optional, all teachers attend the school year "camp". The district typically combines multiple professional learning topics within one camp.



"Book Club" Style Training

At **District D** administrators provided each teacher with a copy of Ken O'Connor's *How to Grade for Learning*. Teachers read a portion of the book before each session and then participated in a discussion facilitated by the school principal. The Department of Teaching and Learning trained each principal to lead the six discussion sessions.

Ongoing Support:



Discussion during Existing PD Time

Several profiled districts provide ongoing training during preexisting professional development time. For example, administrators at **District B** designate some of the monthly district-led professional development sessions to competency-based grading. The sessions often include presentations, handouts, and opportunities for teachers to provide feedback.



Small Group Support

A Professional Learning Team (PLT) at **District E** provides teachers with ongoing support on competency-based grading through small group assistance. The PLT members answer teacher questions and ensure that teachers follow the district's grading principles. For example, the PLT may meet with a small group of math teachers to work on aligning assessments to standards.



One-on-One Support

Most profiled districts leverage instructional coaches for one-on-one support for teachers throughout the school year. For example, an instructional coach may help a teacher who is struggling to understand where students fall on a proficiency scale. The Department of Teaching and Learning at **District B** also responds to individual teacher requests for resources.

Promote Teacher-to-Teacher Discussion to Support Implementation and Encourage Teacher Buy-In

District administrators at **District A**, **District B**, and **District D** note that teacher-to-teacher discussion played a critical role in garnering teacher buy-in and increasing teacher understanding of competency-based grading. At District D, district administrators allocated professional learning time to allow teachers to discuss their concerns and experiences with competency-based grading. Similarly, administrators at District A encouraged teacher discussion of competency-based grading at department meetings and during early-release professional development periods. Contacts note that casual teacher-to-teacher conversations likely had the greatest impact on teachers who were initially skeptical about the new grading system.

Teacher-to-teacher communication at District B catalyzed the rapid adoption of competency-based grading. Contacts note that teachers shared with others how the system benefited their teaching and their students. To further encourage implementation, the district shared a video of teachers explaining how competency-based grading helped focus and streamline their work.

Common Questions and Concerns among Teachers

Identified by Administrators at Profiled Districts

How do I get my students to do their homework if it isn't graded?	When should I award a zero?
How can I communicate student behavior if it isn't included in the grade?	Do I need to rewrite my tests for these standards?
How do I determine if a student is at a three or four on a given competency?	How do I record competency scores in the online gradebook?

District D also provided clear explanations of how their current grading system failed to prepare students for college and career success.

To Earn Teacher Buy-In, Communicate a Clear and Compelling Reason for the Transition

Contacts at **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** recommend districts consider and articulate how competency-based grading will support district goals. Explaining the reason for transitioning to competency-based grading helped these three districts earn teacher buy-in among wariness that the competency-based grading would negatively impact teaching and increase teacher workload.

During announcements and teacher professional development sessions, point to specific ways the transition will benefit the district. For example, administrators might explain that competency-based grading has increased student ownership of learning at other districts. This improvement would contribute to the district goal of increasing student college readiness.

Furthermore, **District A** encourages teachers who piloted competency-based grading to share how the system has impacted their relationships with students; multiple teachers found that they can gauge student mastery more effectively under competency-based grading.

Solicit Teacher Feedback and Respond to Their Suggestions

Contacts at **District C** stress that open communication between administrators and teachers proves crucial when implementing competency-based grading. To foster open-communication, administrators meet with teachers to discuss the transition, record teacher feedback, and gauge the level of implementation occurring within classrooms. To supplement in-person meetings, administrators at **District E** send online surveys regarding the transition.

It is important to show that the district is willing to make adjustments to the grading system based on teacher feedback. Most profiled districts made mid-year changes to the grading system to incorporate teacher suggestions. While challenging, contacts note that this respect for feedback increases buy-in. For example, administrators at **District B** held quarterly meetings with teachers who were beta-testing competency-based grading in their classrooms. Administrators dedicated half of each meeting to feedback on the philosophical elements of the grading system and half to the technical elements of the online gradebook. To show that the district valued teacher feedback, the assistant superintendent attended these quarterly meetings. The district made over 100 changes to the online grading system based on teacher input.

Voluntary Implementation and Inclusion of the Teachers' Union in Decision-Making Mitigates Pushback

Profiled districts have taken steps to successfully mitigate pushback from teachers' unions. For example, **District B**'s school board chose not to grant official approval for full implementation of competency-based grading partially out of concern about the teachers' union. District administrators attribute the lack of teacher's union pushback to the voluntary nature of the implementation process. Administrators at **District E** credit active involvement by the teachers' union in the decision-making process for their support of competency-based grading. Contacts at **District C** believe that focusing on the potential improvements in student success under competency-based learning has mitigated pushback from the teachers' union, even among concerns that the system would increase teacher workload.

4) Parent and Student Communication

Communication Strategies

Heavily involved parents at stakeholder meetings may become influential advocates for competency-based grading and foster additional parent buy-in.

Contacts Utilize Frequent and Repetitive Communication to Educate Parents about Competency-Based Grading

Contacts at **District A** and **District E** recommend districts host multiple parent meetings and prepare in-depth materials for parents on competency-based grading. Contacts at both districts also recommend that administrators repeat information about the grading system as it may require multiple discussions for parents to fully understand the system. District E supplemented district parent meetings with visits to stakeholder group meetings, such as a Parent-Teacher Association meeting, to further address parent questions.

District D and District E both found success when teachers, rather than administrators, explained the new grading system to parents. Teachers can do so at district meetings or during parent-teacher conferences. In particular, districts found that teachers mitigate parent concerns when they explain that students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency through retakes.

Supplement In-Person Communication with Written Guides and FAQ Sheets on the New Grading System

Each profiled district published a parent guide and/or FAQ sheet to increase parent understanding of competency-based grading. Some districts also published videos of teachers and/or administrators describing the change. Administrators post these materials on the district and school websites and distribute them through posts on social media.

Prepare Teachers to Communicate with Students about Competency-Based Grading

Contacts at **District B**, **District C**, and **District E** note that students rely on their teachers to explain competency-based grading. In particular, teachers must educate students on the proficiency scale and the value of homework.

At most profiled districts, teachers communicate with students about the grading system during class at the beginning of the school year and during student conferences. Because teachers at District E have requested additional support in communicating competency-based grading to students, the district may incorporate guidance into teacher professional development.

Parent and Student Concerns

Pushback Typically Stems from High-Achieving Students and Their Parents

All profiled districts note that parent and student pushback against competency-based grading is strongest among high-achieving students and their parents. Concerns from these parents often focus on the following questions:

- Will my child's success decrease under the new system?
- Why does the system need to change if my child is already successful?
- What does it mean to get a "4" on a proficiency scale?
- Is the district using my child as a "guinea pig?"
- If traditional grading worked well for me, why would it not work well for my child too?
- Will grading be more subjective under the new system?
- Will the new system impact my child's success in college admissions?

Profiled districts note that they have addressed these concerns with mixed success, even after a significant amount of discussion.

Districts Provide Targeted Responses to Assuage Parent Concerns

Beyond parents of high-achieving students, parents from many other cohorts express some concern with competency-based grading. The following graphic overviews areas of concern among parents that profiled districts have addressed during their implementation of competency-based grading.

Common Parent Concerns with Competency-Based Grading and Example District Responses

Concern

Moving to competency-based grading will negatively impact students' college applications and/or scholarship awards.

District Response

- All profiled districts convert competency scores into letter grades for use in transcripts.
- Administrators share research showing that applicants from districts with competency-based grading are not disadvantaged in college admissions.
- Administrators at **District E** hosted admissions professionals from local universities to discuss the admissions process and impact (or lack thereof) of competency-based grading on student applications. The district shared a video of the conversation.

Competency-based grading does not place enough value on homework.

- Administrators at **District B** encourage parents and students to view homework as "practice before the game." While homework is not graded, it is still important for success.
- **District C** lists homework in the gradebook even though it is not included in the final grade. This allows parents to see if students complete homework assignments, an indicator of likely success in the course.
- Administrators at **District A** include homework in the final grade (it currently accounts for 10 percent of the grade).

Competency-based grading will not effectively serve special-education students.

- Profiled districts communicate how competency-based grading will comply with student IEPs. **District B** dedicated time during their annual conference on special education to ensure all teachers understood how to comply with IEPs while implementing competency-based grading.
- Administrators at **District D** adapted the online grading system to allow teachers to indicate student progress even when that progress does not fall on the traditional proficiency scale.

5) Research Methodology

- Project Challenge** Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:
- What steps composed the transition from traditional to competency-based grading at the district?
 - Who was involved in each step?
 - What was the timeline for each step?
 - How does the district represent grades on high school transcripts?
 - What obstacles did contacts encounter during the transition to competency-based grading?
 - What types of professional learning did districts conduct to educate teachers about the competency-based grading system?
 - Were any of the offerings particularly effective or ineffective?
 - Did contacts use a vendor for professional learning on competency-based grading? If so, which one?
 - How did contacts communicate about the transition to competency-based learning with stakeholder groups?
 - Did contacts experience pushback from the teachers' union? If so, how did contacts address these concerns?
 - Did contacts experience pushback from parents? If so, how did contacts address their concerns?
 - Did particular student segments voice concerns about the transition? If so, which segments and how did contacts address their concerns?
 - Through which channels did contacts communicate with stakeholders about the transition to competency-based grading?
 - What messaging proved particularly effective or ineffective for communicating about the shift?
 - How did contacts address concerns about the impact of competency-based grading on the college admissions process?
 - Have contacts noticed any impact on the college admissions process?

- Project Sources** The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:
- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
 - National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

The Forum interviewed assistant superintendents and directors of curriculum at public school districts in the United States.

A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

District	Location	Approximate Student Population
District A	Midwest	7,000
District B	Mountain West	70,000
District C	Midwest	20,000
District D	Pacific West	30,000
District E	Mountain West	15,000