

## Improving Grading & Assessment at ANCS

At ANCS, the assessment of student progress towards skill and content standards is guided by our belief in [the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools](#). A few specific sentences and phrases from the CES principles highlight elements of our approach:

- *The school's goals should apply to all students, while the means to these goals will vary as those students themselves vary.*
- *Teaching and learning should be documented and assessed with tools based on student performance of real tasks. Students not yet at appropriate levels of competence should be provided intensive support and resources to assist them quickly to meet those standards. Multiple forms of evidence, ranging from ongoing observation of the learner to completion of specific projects, should be used to better understand the learner's strengths and needs, and to plan for further assistance.*

Although we are guided by these ideas, there has admittedly been, through the years, *inconsistency in the ways they are reflected in practice by different teachers and varying degrees of clarity in how student progress gets communicated to students and parents.* Feedback from many teachers and parents identified these two areas for improvement, and over the past year, our faculty and staff has started on a path towards addressing them.

Last year, we began this work with a yearlong focus on using a common language and approach to planning curriculum units. Based on the framework known as ["Understanding by Design"](#), our teachers now work more closely in teams to prepare for their teaching by "planning backwards": first articulating the standards of what students should know and be able to do at the end of a unit, then determining how they will assess those skills, knowledge, and understandings, and finally, mapping out the learning activities and practice that will support students towards those standards. We continue to refine our use of this outlining of units.

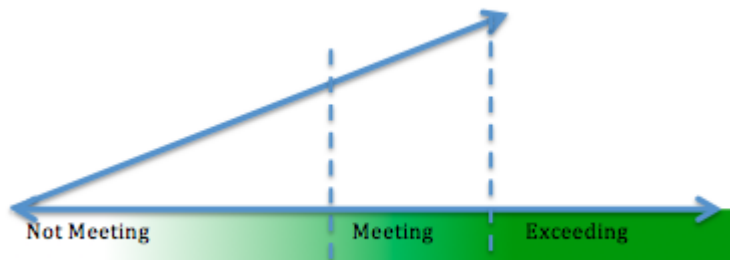
The next phase of our improvement has been centered on defining the common language and practices we aim to use across the school. A task force made up of teachers from K-8 worked over the summer to look at survey responses from teachers and parents, discuss similarities and differences in our current grading and assessment approaches in different classrooms, and to research current best practices in assessing student progress. One result of their work is the draft of the "Grading and Assessment at ANCS - Frequently Asked Questions" document that follows. The document incorporates their thinking along with feedback from the full faculty/staff and a range of parents to serve as a starting point for explaining how students are assessed and practices we aspire to use consistently at both campuses.

As we continue to develop consistency in practices across the school, the next steps on our path towards improving our assessment system will focus on greater clarity in how we communicate about student learning progress: (1) the terms we use to show where a student is at in relation to learning standards, and (2) the way we structure our forms of communicating with students and parents (rubrics, progress reports, etc.)

## ***Draft--Grading & Assessment Practices at ANCS--Draft Frequently Asked Questions from Parents***

***I hear that ANCS uses “standards-based grading”. What does that mean?*** We define standards-based grading as “a system of reporting student proficiency in a number of specific learning goals (or standards). This system provides students with multiple assessments and opportunities to show their proficiency in each of the skills and/or content areas assessed. The idea is that at the end of the unit, a student is working towards mastering the essential content and skills necessary for the next level. This system is focused on knowledge and skills demonstrated and progress over time rather than points earned.”

***So my student’s grade isn’t just the number of points he got divided by the number of points possible? That’s how I was graded, so now I’m confused!*** A student’s work on major graded projects and assignments is not given a traditional number grade or letter grade that represents lots of points added up and then averaged. Those approaches often don’t give accurate information about a student’s learning (for example, having one poor performance skew a grade or mixing in work habits like “participation” or “homework completion” in with what students actually know and can do). Instead, a student’s work is given a “grade” that really serves as an assessment of where along a continuum his skill and demonstration of knowledge fall in relation to what’s expected for students based on the standards for that grade level in whatever is being assessed. So the grade conveys where a student is on the journey towards “meeting” the standards (see image below). It is our belief that with practice and feedback all students can and will meet the standards—it may just take students different lengths of time to get there and different means of doing so.



### ***How do my students and I know what the standards are?***

Each unit/project for a student is tied to some of the standards in the Georgia Performance Standards. Ideally, students should be provided a rubric that outlines the specific standards (what they should know and be able to do) on which they will be assessed and for that rubric to be reviewed with students near the start of a unit. As noted earlier, this is a practice on which we are working towards more consistency.

***If my student is “meeting” the standards, is that where she should be?*** The short answer is “yes”. If a student is meeting the standards, then that means she is *showing skills and knowledge that are expected at that time for that grade level*. That doesn’t mean that this level of proficiency will always result in pieces of work that look exactly the same from student to student on the same project. Just like two figure skating routines in the Olympics might receive similarly high marks but look different, there is a range of what “meeting” the standard can look like on an assignment. This also means that students may meet the standard but still receive feedback about ways that they can deepen their learning next time so that they may improve their work.

***If my student is “exceeding” the standards, what does that mean?*** The short answer is “showing skills and knowledge on a project that’s about a grade level beyond where we would expect him to be”. Again, that doesn’t mean that every piece of work that receives an “exceeding” will look the same—and students who exceed can and should still receive feedback about how to further their skills and learning.

***Ok, I get how this works for individual projects. But how’s my student’s grade for an academic term determined?*** Another reason we don’t use a more traditional grading practice of assigning points and then determining a final grade by taking the average of all the points earned in a term is because it can be misleading in communicating information about a student’s actual performance (for example, a student who does poorly on one assessment is hampered by that one assessment if grades are averaged even if she meets the standards on all the other assessments). Instead, we look at how a student has performed relative to our grade level standards across a term and report a grade that reflects the consistency of their performance over the term (in statistical terms, that’s called the “mode”). The grade reported aims as much as possible to reflect a student’s accumulated competency in the skills and knowledge assessed in that class for that term, paying more attention to recent performance trends as a better indicator of where a student is at rather than earlier performance, especially if a student has shown recent growth. Also, a student’s work habits are reported on separately so that there’s a clear picture of her academic skills and knowledge as different than areas like her effort, persistence, and engagement

***I’ve got a student at both ANCS campuses. Is there a reason the grading scale is different between the two?*** We attempt to have consistency between the two campuses in how teachers communicate when a student is “exceeding” or “meeting” the standards. For grades below meeting, there are slight differences between the scales used at each campus that are largely because of the systems used before the two campuses merged to form a single school. As our International Baccalaureate (IB) exploratory task force takes up looking at whether it would be beneficial for ANCS to become IB-authorized, we are holding on making any changes to the grading scale because IB has its own grading scale. Once there is clarity on whether we decide to pursue IB-authorization, we will look more closely at the differences in the grading scales between our campuses.

***What happens when my student goes to high school (or any school other than ANCS)?***

***How will they know how he's doing?*** We provide an explanatory letter about our grading system with the records we provide to a student's new school. Many of the high schools where we have had multiple students go through the years have told us how much they appreciate the depth and richness of the feedback they get from our grading system and narrative reports that go beyond simply giving a letter or number grade or average.

***What can I do to help support my student in this kind of grading system?*** First, please help remind her about all of the answers to the questions above—some of them may have the same questions. Second, help her to focus on the feedback and comments she receives as much as (maybe even more than) the “grade” itself. We want students to understand clearly what they are doing well with in their skills and learning and how they can improve and feedback will always do a better job at communicating this than even our grades. Finally, remind students that grades are simply a form of communication and like all forms of communication, it's not perfect—if there's something that doesn't make sense to your student or you, always feel free to follow up with the teacher, especially as we work as a faculty on improving our consistency and clarity.