



**WAKE COUNTY**  
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

MIDDLE SCHOOL COMPETENCY-  
BASED GRADING INITIATIVE:  
2018-19 TO 2020-21

June 2022



## ABSTRACT

This report focuses on a competency-based grading initiative at Carroll Middle School. The initiative was implemented from 2018-19 to 2020-21 to address the lack of alignment between report card grades and End-of-Grade (EOG) test results and was designed to ensure consistent delivery of standards-based instruction, formative assessment, and grading. The report addresses changes in stakeholder perceptions over time and describes the instructional approaches used. The results show that while students' and teachers' satisfaction with the grading system improved, some parents remained unsure of how to interpret competency-based grades. Since EOGs were not administered in 2019-20 and results were influenced by low participation rates in 2020-21, we were unable to examine possible proficiency changes during the initiative's implementation. However, we were able to identify Carroll graduates in high school to examine their performance. We compared the grade point averages (GPAs), first quarter grades, and grade 9 retention rates of Carroll Middle School graduates to that of other freshmen in the same high school in Fall 2021. Results show that Carroll graduates did as well as students from other middle schools. These results suggest that Carroll should consider providing more support to parents to build understanding of the standards and grades, discuss ways for parents to support their children's learning in the competency-grading environment, and address parents' concerns about the interpretability of grades. School administrators should continue to support teachers in their competency-based grading efforts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2018-19, in response to lower-than-expected standardized test results in core subject areas and varied teacher expectations in grading, Carroll Middle School adopted a competency-based grading approach where student learning is measured by mastery of multiple specific elements of the NC Standard Course of Study. To achieve goals related to students' increase in ownership over their learning and improved student achievement, the school implemented specific strategies, such as instruction and assessment focused on specific standards, use of digital portfolios, and student-led conferences. In 2019-20, Carroll Middle School adopted Empower, a technology-based learning management platform, to capture students' grades and house all evidence of student learning.

The purpose of this report is to examine the implementation and outcomes of the competency-based grading initiative implemented from 2018-19 to 2020-21 at Carroll Middle School. We used multiple data sources to inform this report's findings, including teacher and student surveys, parent focus groups, Professional Learning Team (PLT) observations, and student achievement data. This report provides results related to the competency-based grading initiative's implementation, as well as short-term and long-term goals.



## BACKGROUND

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Competency-based grading describes an approach to teaching and learning in which students advance through the curriculum after demonstrating mastery. The approach is similar to standards-based, mastery-based, or performance-based grading (Ryan & Cox, 2016). Competency-based grading is not currently a universally accepted approach to grading within the Wake County Public School System's (WCPSS) middle schools, and, at this point, is unique to Carroll Middle School. Instead of using a traditional letter grading system, competency-based grading measures student progress by the level of mastery of individual standards or competencies (see Appendix D). Standards-based grading and similar competency-based grading practices are intended to reduce teacher subjectivity and provide a more equitable grading system, resulting in a more meaningful grade. The analysis of WCPSS' standards-based grading in elementary schools revealed a strong relationship between the students' classroom grades and EOG scores, indicating this grading system accomplishes its intended purpose of assessing students' knowledge of North Carolina's curriculum (Paepflow, 2011). The benefits include providing a grading system with equity potential, offering a predictive tool to identify struggling students, and requiring teachers to assess students' understanding (Paepflow, 2011). This approach can enable teachers to hold all students to the same standards regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or geographical area. See Appendix A for relevant research data.

The Pathway of Change developed for this initiative demonstrates the need for the use of the competency-based grading initiative and illustrates the strategies used to meet the need, implementation goals, and long-term outcomes (see Figure 1). The logic model is included in Appendix B.

As part of the implementation, parents receive competency-based report cards which provide information on student mastery of specific content and skills within the established curriculum (see Appendix C). One of the initiative’s long-term goals is to make sure that grades and the EOGs more consistently reflect student progress.

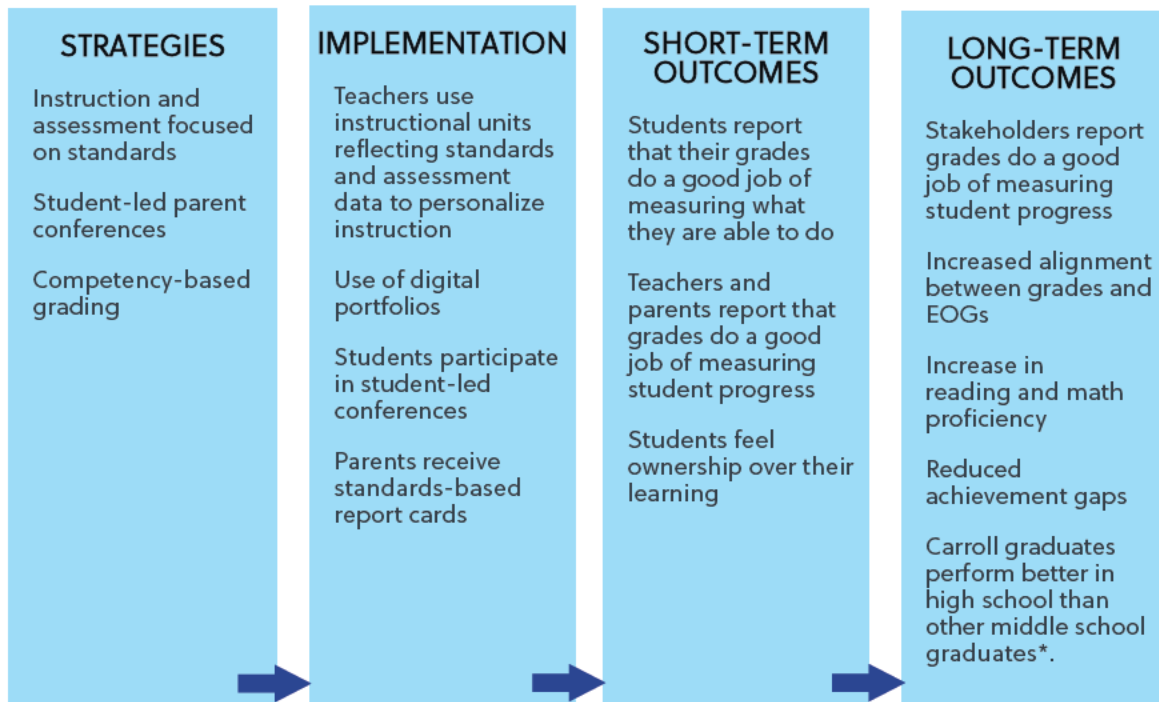
The ultimate goals for the competency-based grading initiative are to increase student achievement and reduce achievement gaps among student subgroups. However, the absence of EOG testing in 2019-20, the switch to mostly virtual teaching in 2020-21, and the pandemic’s suppressive effect on the percentage of students who took EOG assessments impacted the interpretability of

the EOG results in 2020-21 as compared to prior years. To address the data limitations, we revised the long-term student outcomes used to examine the impact of competency-based grading on student achievement. The revised long-term outcome which we examined was high school readiness. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, 73% to 76% of Carroll Middle School graduates attended Sanderson High School in grade 9. To determine how Carroll Middle School graduates perform in high school, we examined their GPAs and first quarter grades in the fall of 2021. We compared those data for Carroll graduates to other Sanderson High School freshmen to see how Carroll Middle School graduates perform once they are in a traditional grading environment.

Figure 1

**Competency-based grading pathway of change shows how the need led to the long-term goals and what strategies were used to address the need and focus efforts toward achieving the goals**

**Need:** Student grades show higher reading and math proficiency compared to EOG scores. Compared to WCPSS, a lower percentage of students report that the grades in their classes do a good job of measuring what they are able to do. Many students do not feel ownership over their learning or feel like they have a say about what happens to them at school.



\*Note: We used a revised long-term goal for this report because of the issues related to limitations of the 2020-21 EOG test scores and, therefore, our ability to compare those to previous years.





## METHODS

This report is based on descriptive quantitative and qualitative data in addition to the quasi-experimental analysis. Conclusions are supported as shown in Table 1.

We used various data sources (see Figure 2) to draw conclusions for this report, including teacher and student surveys, parent focus groups, PLT observations, and student achievement data. Data sources were either from 2019-20 or 2020-21, depending on availability. For example, because only 17 of the 62 Carroll teachers responded to the 2020-21 teacher survey, teacher responses may not have been representative of the entire faculty. Thus, we did not include 2020-21 teacher survey results in this report. We conducted PLT observations in 2019-20 as initially planned; however, we postponed parent focus groups until Fall 2021 due to the pandemic.

Table 1

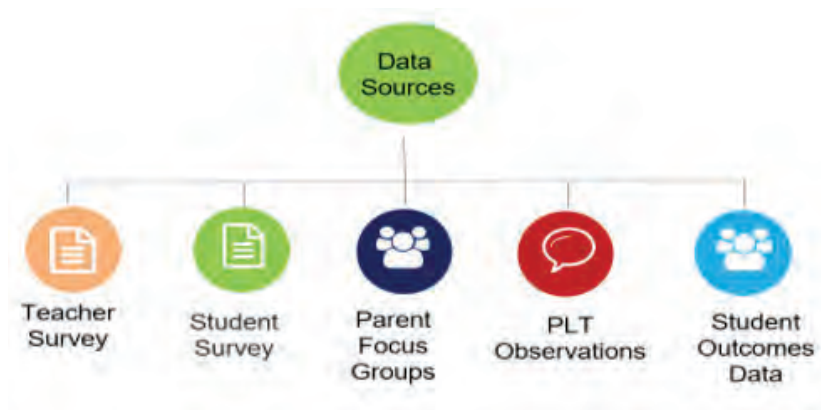
Conclusions in this study were supported by a combination of the quasi-experimental and descriptive research designs

Research Design	Conclusions
<input type="checkbox"/> Experimental	We can conclude that the program or policy caused changes in outcomes because the research design used random assignment.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Quasi-Experimental	We can reasonably conclude that the program or policy caused changes in outcomes because an appropriate comparison strategy was used.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Descriptive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Quantitative</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Qualitative</li> </ul>	These designs provide outcome data for the program or policy, but differences cannot be attributed directly to it due to lack of a comparative control group.

Data Sources: List, Sadoff, & Wagner (2011); What Works Clearinghouse (2014)

Figure 2

Multiple data sources were used for this study







## FINDINGS

### IMPLEMENTATION GOALS

In the spring of 2019-20, and throughout 2020-21, the disruptions to schooling resulting from the pandemic complicated the implementation of many initiatives in WCPSS. Due to these unique circumstances, progress on competence-based grading initiatives' implementation goals was likely affected, thus impacting the reported results. One of the implementation goals was the delivery of standards-based instruction and the use of standards-based assessment.

To collect these implementation data, the evaluation team observed PLT instructional planning in core subject areas and examined archived PLT minutes. The goal was for 90% of observed PLTs utilizing instructional units to reflect the standards/competencies. While our findings reflect at least 65% of the PLTs in the first semester of 2019-20, and 71% of the observed PLTs in the second semester showed evidence of explicit discussions of the standards, these percentages most likely underrepresented the actual occurrences of teacher use of the standards-based approach. Some instances of the use of instruction closely following the standards or competencies may not have been recognized by the observers if teachers did not specifically use the terms 'standards' or 'competencies,' or refer to them explicitly during discussions. It is possible that the observed teams had








competencies in mind during PLT discussions, but they were not specifically referred to by standard or as ‘standards’ or ‘competencies,’ rather they were referred to by content-specific language (e.g., compare/contrast). The goal of 75% of PLTs using assessment data to target specific areas reflecting student weakness and advancement was met in the first semester (84%) of 2019-20. However, only 63% were observed doing so (during the pandemic) in the second semester.

Furthermore, the school’s goals related to improving stakeholder views on grading were met in 2020-21 based on the input from teachers and students but were mixed for parents. Parent focus groups conducted in Fall 2021 revealed some parent confusion on how to interpret grades and use information from report cards.

Evidence of improving student ownership of learning measured through student survey responses and the teacher-reported use of digital portfolios, was strong. In 2019-20, 89% of teachers reported students using digital portfolios, surpassing the goal of 60%. Over half of students (57%) in 2019-20 and close to two-thirds (72%) in 2020-21 felt like they ‘had a say about what happens to them at school.

**Table 2**

**Two of four implementation goals were met in 2020-21. Only two implementation goals were measured in 2018-19**

Pathway of Change Goal Areas	Implementation Goal Status		
	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Teachers use instructional units reflecting standards and assessment data to personalize instruction	Not measured		Not measured
Use of digital portfolios			Limited data
Students participate in student-led conferences	Not available	Not available	
Parents receive standards-based report cards			



Note: PLT data collection was conducted during 2019-20 and not continued in 2020-21.



## Teachers Used Instructional Units Aligned with Standards

The most efficient way to observe instructional alignment with standards was during PLT meetings. We examined archived PLT minutes from the first semester, before observing PLTs during the second semester of 2019-20. We observed close to 50 PLT meetings in core subject areas, before and after the district's switch to providing remote instruction. We did not conduct any further observations of PLTs in 2020-21.

Our findings revealed that PLT discussions addressed various components of teaching and learning, including designing instructional activities aligned with standards, implementing or developing shared assessments, and reviewing strategies to improve student engagement to support ownership of student learning. In addition to the discussion of instruction aligned with standards, teachers discussed student performance and the sharing of feedback with students, reviewed task completion, discussed opportunities for mastery, focused on pacing, and addressed barriers to learning.

Core subject area PLTs observed in Spring 2020 consistently focused on designing instruction and developing instructional activities aligned with standards. During the discussions which focused on planning activities and using assessments to provide students opportunities to demonstrate mastery, at least 71% of PLT meetings explicitly reviewed the standards. Mastery was defined by a grading level of 3 ("meeting the standards") or 4 ("exceeding the standards") on three separate class assignments. In 2020-21, during the pandemic, the scale was changed to reflect a simpler "behind pace, on pace, or ahead of pace" scale. The PLTs observed in the spring of 2020 consistently reviewed what students had mastered to ensure instructional units reflected the

standards and to determine which standards still needed to be taught and assessed. Teachers aimed to ensure each of the standards was addressed at least three times during the instructional process to demonstrate mastery based on the competency-based grading system and to identify the standards that required reteaching. Teachers tried to avoid the imbalance of some standards having too many pieces of evidence and others having too few.

Consistent with the school's grading policy, while reviewing task completion, teachers offered several opportunities to students to demonstrate mastery by resubmitting work previously identified as incomplete. Some students took advantage of those opportunities and used teacher feedback to turn in more polished work and receive full credit.

About 40% of the observed PLTs included reviews of student data to identify areas of mastery and any need to develop competency. PLTs frequently reviewed students' task completion and performance on standards. Teachers used the Empower learning platform to review student performance per standard to determine if students were at mastery level.

Pacing in the remote learning format was another component of the PLT discussions. Teams addressed pacing through the discussions of the standards to be assessed, content to cover, activities to deliver the content, new skills to include, and how these factors impacted grading. Pacing of weekly lessons using Google Meet was sometimes adjusted halfway through weekly activities to give students additional opportunities to master the content.

### Assessments

Teachers evaluated the mastery of standards using a variety of assessments shared during PLT sessions. Evidence of discussions and development of pre- and post-assessments,



rubrics, quizzes, level 4 (exceeding the standards) enrichment opportunities, and re-assessments aligned with the instructional units and standards was prevalent at 63% of observed PLT meetings.

PLTs consistently focused on using and developing shared assessments that were aligned with standards. The assessments contributed to three specific pieces of evidence of mastery, based on the school's competency-based grading system. Teachers compared planned activities to the standards to assess how they aligned with the competency chart and used or developed shared rubrics for activities based on standards. A few of the observed PLTs reviewed data trends over time to assess student performance on similar standards. With the goal of using unit assessment data to target specific areas of weakness and advancement; and after identifying deficits in students' knowledge, some PLTs discussed reassessments.

Teams made decisions on adjusting materials to reiterate previously taught concepts and discussed the strategies to reteach the skills that were not yet mastered. In at least 10% of PLT meetings, teachers discussed the instructional strategies to support those students who had not yet mastered the content and the use of level 4 (exceeding the standards) enrichment opportunities to support those who had already achieved mastery.

PLTs also addressed barriers to learning and difficulties that students had with the assignments. While balancing remote learning activities with the review of standards, PLTs discussed various opportunities for sharing descriptive feedback with students. Teachers recorded feedback for students and offered it as a resource for their team and used it for shared opportunities for students to give feedback to each other.

## Strategies to Improve Student Engagement

Review of student participation and engagement was a common occurrence in the remote learning environment. Immediately after teachers began providing remote instruction, some PLT discussions revealed issues with student attendance. Initial engagement issues were discussed, such as muting microphones and being off task. Overall engagement during remote learning followed patterns similar to those of in-person classes. As technology access issues were resolved, students became increasingly comfortable with the remote learning format. Teachers continued to express specific concerns, such as students submitting incomplete work on Empower or earning grades without participating in the lessons in Google Meet.

Observed PLTs consistently focused on discussing strategies to improve student engagement as a method of strengthening student ownership of learning and outcomes. For example, at least 38% of PLTs discussed scaffolding and the use of additional supports as a way to improve student engagement, gradually pulling those supports away as students became more familiar with the expectations.

To better understand the factors that promoted or hindered student engagement and to gauge the balance of weekly assignments, PLTs incorporated parent feedback into their discussions of students' completion of tasks. One team noted that walking parents through the learning sites to help them navigate those sites had helped student attendance and participation.

In addition to using Empower to guide lesson planning and determine what standards needed more focus, various instructional technology resources were discussed by



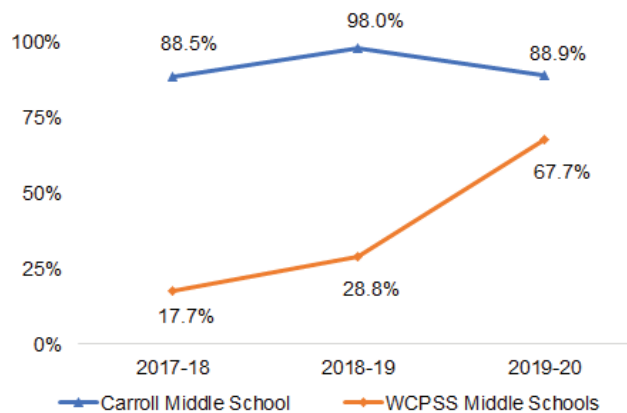
teachers at about half of the PLT meetings. Some of the resources used for lesson planning and delivering instructional content in an engaging and interactive way included Brainpop, Flocabulary, Flipgrid, Quizzizz, and Desmos. Google Classroom and Google Meet were used to work with students needing additional support and to remediate student understanding of concepts. Games and Nearpod were used to make lessons more interactive. Other instructional technologies used for aiding the instructional process included Jamboard, Google Forms, Google Slides, Canva, Google Drawing, TedTalk, and Infographics. ZipGrade was used to chart pre- and post-test data, and Schoolnet was used to collect student performance data and to study trends of performance over time.

### Digital Portfolios

One strategy for strengthening students’ ownership of learning was through the continued use of digital portfolios, which provided students a way to curate and share their work. Carroll Middle School students were encouraged to use digital portfolios to demonstrate their learning, reflect on the content learned, the skills gained, and share progress with their parents.

The districtwide teacher survey included a question on student portfolio use. Across WCPSS, the percentage of middle school teachers reporting student digital portfolio use increased from 29% in 2018-19 to 68% in 2019-20. However, according to teacher feedback, the digital portfolio use by Carroll Middle students was at a much higher level (89%). Although fewer teachers reported Carroll Middle students keeping samples of their work in a digital portfolio, with a decrease from 98% in 2018-19 to 89% in 2019-20, the percentages reported still reflect much greater digital portfolio use among Carroll Middle School students compared to WCPSS for both of those years (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
 2017-18 to 2019-20 teacher survey results showed higher digital portfolio use at Carroll Middle than at other middle schools

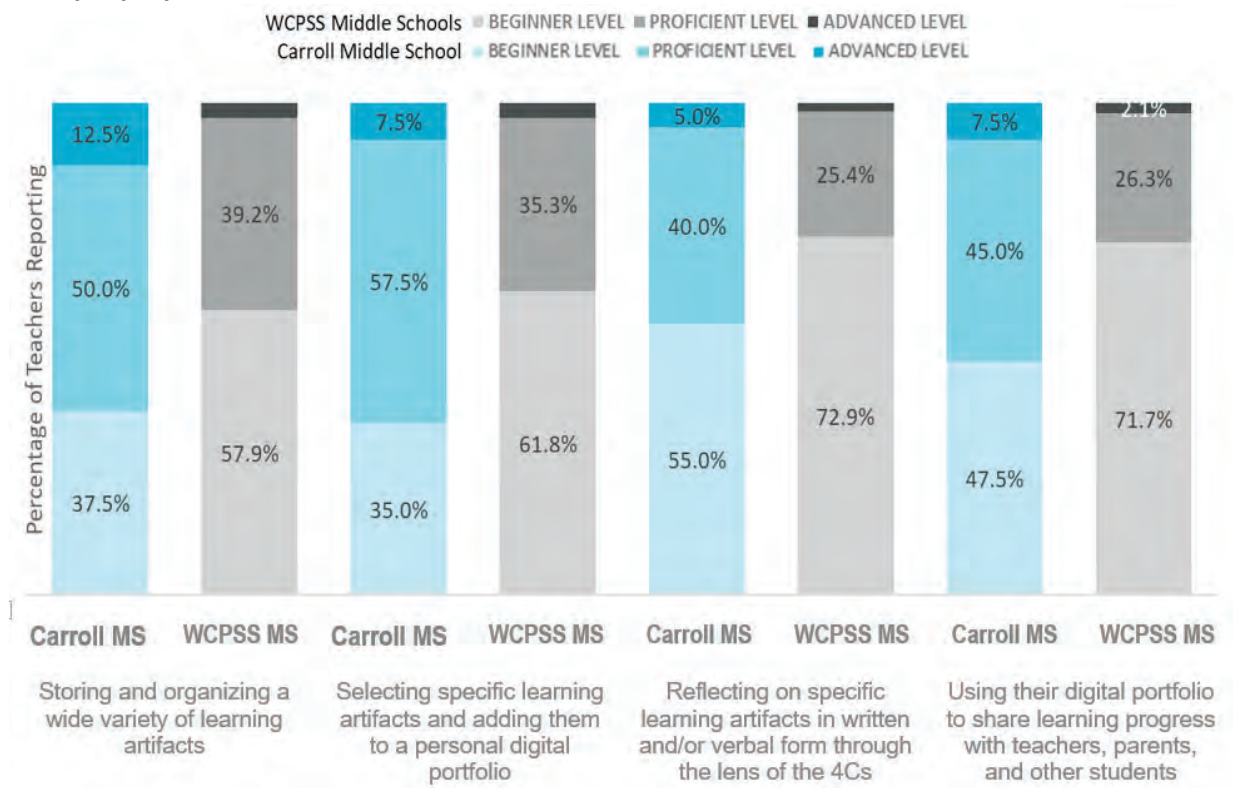


Note: Only 17 of 62 Carroll Middle School teachers responded to the survey in 2020-21. Thus, their responses were not included.



We further examined the range of students' digital portfolio use, which included not only storing and selecting learning artifacts in a digital portfolio but also, among other functions, sharing their work and learning progress with teachers and parents. One way to closely examine the extent of digital portfolio use was by asking teachers about the levels of student proficiency of use in various tasks related to digital portfolio use. The proficiency levels could range from simply storing learning artifacts in a digital portfolio to sharing digital portfolios with teachers and parents. The comparisons of digital portfolio use at Carroll Middle and WCPSS showed consistently higher percentages of Carroll Middle students being proficient or advanced on all four indicators of use compared to WCPSS middle school students (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
**In 2019-20, higher percentages of Carroll Middle School teachers than teachers across WCPSS middle schools reported their students being proficient or advanced in using digital portfolios for multiple purposes**



Note: 2020-21 data were not included due to a low survey response rate among Carroll Middle School teachers (n=17).

Information from parents on students' use of digital portfolios was not available for 2019-20, since we were unable to conduct parent focus groups. Focus groups were instead rescheduled for Fall 2021. The data gathered are presented in the long-term goal section of this report.





## Student-Led Conferences

Parents in focus groups noted that the school's communication about parent-teacher conferences was very consistent, even in a virtual environment. During parent-teacher conferences students were expected to lead a presentation of their progress. Eleven parents out of 12 confirmed that their child(ren) participated in parent-teacher conferences and had a chance to showcase their work and new learning. One parent expressed her appreciation of the teachers' efforts to keep parents engaged and was "really excited" that parent-teacher conferences were held even during the pandemic. Another parent noted that she regularly received information about parent-teacher conferences through texts and email. Although her daughter had never shared the information about parent-teacher conferences, she did participate "in a couple of those." The parent was impressed with how her daughter was able to share her progress and learning. Another parent felt that talking to the teachers (through Talking Points) about the child's progress was more helpful than trying to get her child to share progress during the conference.

## Standards-Based Report Cards

As part of the implementation of the standards-based grading initiative, parents received standards-based report cards. We were unable to collect parent focus group data in 2020 due to the pandemic. Parent perceptions of the report cards were captured in Fall 2021 and are presented in the long-term outcomes section of this report.

## SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

The initiative's short-term goals addressed changes in the stakeholders' perceptions of the school's grading system. Figures presented in this section show that student perceptions continued to improve each year following implementation in 2018-19, serving as evidence of improved understanding of the grading system: an increase from 47% in 2018-19, to 64% in 2019-20, to 78% in 2020-21. Teacher data also showed improvements in perceptions from 2018-19 to 2019-20 but were not reported in 2020-21 because of a low survey response rate.

In the fall of 2021, we still found a large array of parent perceptions ranging from not understanding the grades to having a clear idea of how to support a child's learning on specific standards. While initial parent perceptions were measured only through a parent survey, in the fall of 2021, we were able to have more extensive discussions with parents using focus groups. Additionally, students demonstrated an increase in perception of being in control of their learning. This was measured by the percentage of students who responded to the survey and who felt they had a say about what happens to them at school: an increase from 51% in 2018-19 to 72% in 2020-21.



**Table 3**

**Short-term goals that reflected improved student perceptions were met. Parent data showed little improvement while teacher perceptions data showed initial improvement**

Pathway of Change Goal Areas	Short-Term Goal Status		
	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Students report that their grades do a good job of measuring what they are able to do	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■
Teachers report that grades do a good job of measuring student progress	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	Limited data
Parents report that grades do a good job of measuring student progress	■ ■ ■ ■	Not available	■ ■ ■ ■
Students feel ownership over their learning	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■ ■



### Students' Perception of Grades

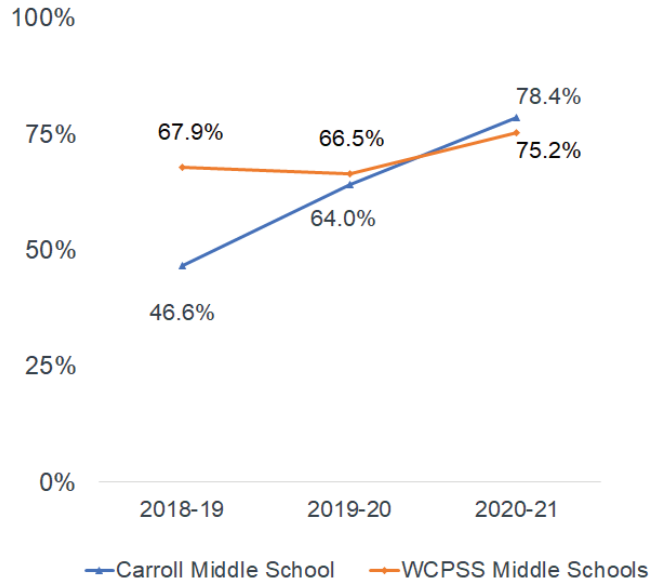
Between 2018-19 and 2020-21, we collected Carroll Middle School students' perceptions of the school's grading system. Survey results showed that student perceptions of the grading system steadily improved from 2018-19 to 2020-21 and were comparable in 2020-21 to other WCPSS middle schools where traditional grading was used. Over three-fourths of the students believed that their grades measured well what they were able to do (see Figure 5).





**Figure 5**

**Students reported that their grades do a good job of measuring what they are able to do (2019-20 to 2020-21)**

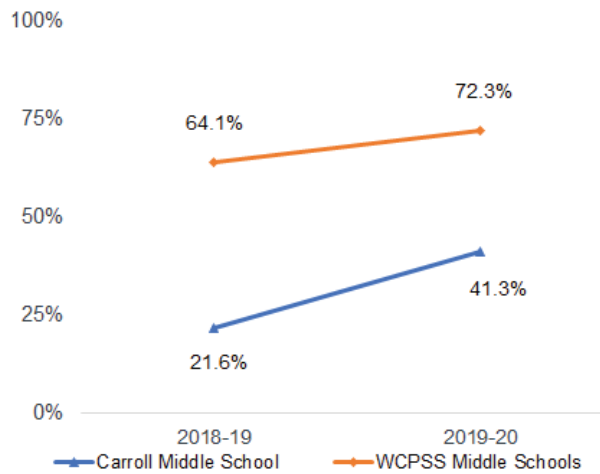


**Teachers’ Perception of Grades**

Teacher survey responses showed that from 2018-19 to 2019-20, their satisfaction with the existing grading system greatly improved. Even though teachers reported a large increase in satisfaction with the current grading system at their school from the 2018-19 levels, this satisfaction with grades was still lower than the WCPSS middle schools overall (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

**In 2019-20, teacher satisfaction with the grading system at the school greatly improved but was still below the district middle school levels of satisfaction with grading**



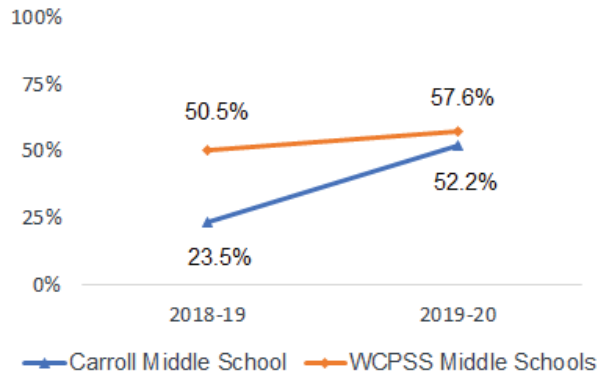
Note: 2020-21 teacher survey data were not used because of a low teacher response rate (n=17).



From 2018-19 to 2019-20, teacher beliefs that report cards accurately reflected students’ actual learning improved. The growth was dramatic, and teacher perceptions of the report cards reflecting actual student learning approached the district averages in 2019-20 (see Figure 7). We did not include 2020-21 data due to a low survey response rate at Carroll.

**Figure 7**

**In the 2019-20 survey, over half of Carroll Middle School teachers believed that students’ report cards accurately reflected their learning**



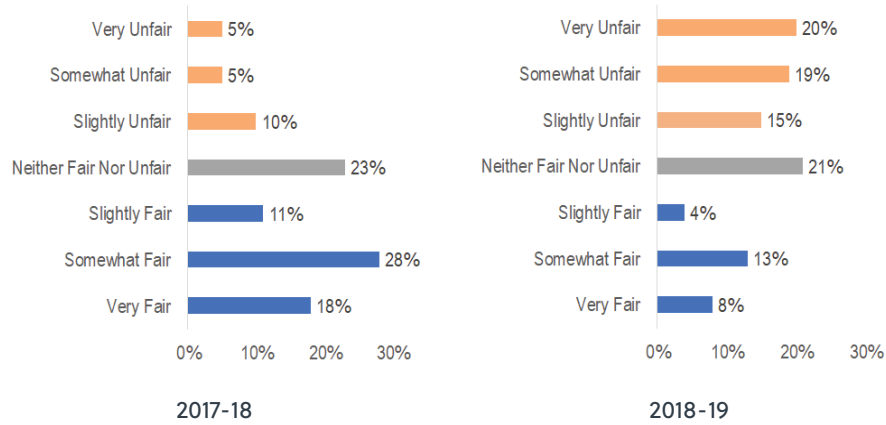
### Parents’ Perception of Grades

When the school started the implementation of the competency-based grading, Carroll parents’ understanding of the grading system sharply decreased. This decrease was reflected in a parent survey conducted in 2018-19. The survey question used to measure parent perceptions of grading was: “How fair or unfair is the school’s system of evaluating children?” The responses were largely non-favorable--in 2018-19 parents’ perceptions of the school’s ability to evaluate students went down by 32 percentage points compared to 2017-18. Less favorable responses were prevalent among parents of White, female, grade 8 students who were not receiving free or reduced-price lunches.



**Figure 8**

In 2018-19, with the introduction of the competency-based grading, parents' responses to the question: "How fair is the school's system of evaluating children?" became more negative than 2017-18 responses



The pandemic prohibited us from collecting data from parents during an already difficult school year. To not overburden parents, we postponed data collection efforts until Fall 2021. The findings from parent focus groups conducted in Fall 2021 are shared within the long-term goals section of this report.

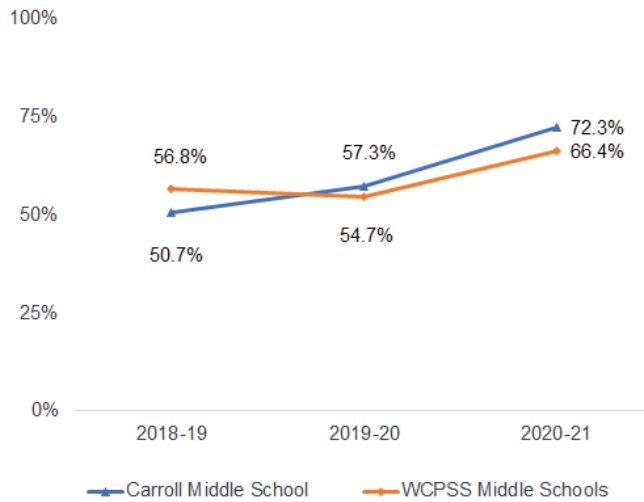
### Students' Ownership of their Learning

One of the initiative's goals was to address the need for students to feel ownership of their learning. As mentioned earlier, to measure any progress towards this goal, we asked teachers to report their students' use of digital portfolios as a way for students to share their work with peers, teachers, and parents. To measure students' ownership of their own learning, we asked them in a survey if they felt like they "had a say about what happened to them at school." Student Survey results showed that Carroll Middle School students' responses consistently improved from 2018-19 to 2020-21, moving from below to above the district average during that time (see Figure 9). In 2020-21, about three-fourths of students felt they had a say about what happens to them at school. Only half of Carroll Middle School students agreed on that issue in 2018-19.



Figure 9

From 2018-19 to 2020-21, the percentage of students who felt they had a say about what happens to them at school consistently increased



Data Source: Student Survey, WCPSS

## LONG-TERM GOALS

To examine goals related to stakeholders’ improved perceptions of the competency-based grading, we measured students’ and parents’ perceptions of grades. We found that in 2021 student perceptions considerably improved. Parents’ perception of the grading system in 2021 still ranged from feeling that the grading system was relatively accurate to a lack of understanding of how the grades worked.

Long-term goals analysis related to academics was complicated due to the pandemic. We were unable to measure the goals reflecting increases in proficiency and reduction of subgroup achievement gaps over time due to the missing EOG test data in Spring 2020 and the covid-related data limitations with the Spring 2021 EOG scores. Instead, we used high school readiness as a revised outcome to measure student achievement.

We felt it would be informative to investigate Carroll graduates’ performance at a high school where a traditional grading system was used. Both the comparisons of GPAs of Sanderson students in grades 10 and 11 and first quarter grades for Sanderson freshmen showed no difference in performance between Carroll graduates and other Sanderson students.



**Table 4**

**Stakeholders’ satisfaction with the grading system differed: while students were positive, parents were critical of grades. Carroll Middle School graduates were as prepared for high school as other students**

Pathway of Change Goal Areas	Long-Term Goal Status	
	2019-20	2020-21
Students report that grades do a good job measuring what they are able to do	■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■
Parents report that grades do a good job of measuring student progress	Not available	■ ■ ■
Increase in reading and math proficiency	Not available	Not available
Increased alignment between grades and EOGs	Not available	Not available
Reduced achievement gaps	Not available	Not available
Carroll graduates perform better in high school than other middle school graduates*	Not available	■ ■ ■



\*Note: We used a revised long-term goal for this report because of the issues related to limitations of the 2020-21 test scores and our limited ability to compare those to previous years.

### Students’ Perceptions of Grades

As mentioned earlier, based on a student survey item stating “grades do a good job of measuring student progress,” student satisfaction with grades considerably improved from 47% in 2018-19 to 78% in 2020-21. Thus, the goal of a 50% increase in students’ satisfaction with grades was met (see Figure 5).



## Parents' Perceptions of Grades, Digital Portfolios, and Report Cards

### Parents' Perceptions of Grades

In the fall of 2021, 120 Carroll Middle School parents were contacted and invited to participate in two focus groups. Using the stratified random sample, we identified 40 parents from each grade level. Twelve out of 120 parents volunteered to participate in a focus group to discuss their perceptions of the school's grading system. A few parents felt the grading system accurately reflected student progress and believed it helped them see exactly what their child was learning, what standards were covered, or where their child needed extra support. However, most parents remained somewhat critical of the grading system and felt grades had little value for students. They shared that the explanation they received of how grades can be used was not sufficient and believed grades did not accurately represent where their children were struggling.

When asked about their understanding of the grading system used in the school, most parents reported being confused with the grades (see Figure 10). They noted that while "the breakout was accurate, the scoring did not make sense," and "it was frustrating to see the child bringing back 'twos' on something." Some others indicated that their understanding of the grading system was limited and felt that the system was not intuitive. Most parents shared that the grading approach based on standards felt vague and confusing. Thus, they felt the grades did not adequately reflect their child's learning progress. Parents stated that to receive accurate and timely information on how to interpret a specific grade and how they could support their children, they had to stay closely involved in the learning process and in

contact with teachers. Parents reported that their conversations with individual teachers about the standards that have been or have not been covered and how their coverage reflected on the grade were very informative and much more helpful than just a number grade they saw in Empower (e.g., 2.5). Finally, a few parents were anxious about their child's transition to high school where a traditional letter grading system is used (see Figure 10).

We also asked parents about grades doing a good job measuring their children's progress and learning. Again, parents' responses varied greatly. Parents expressed concern that grades lagged behind the learning progress. They shared that Empower showed a student being "behind pace" until the entire standard was covered, even if all assignments were completed. While some parents felt that grades did not reflect their child's learning and progress, others expressed a concern that to get an understanding they had to engage a teacher and noted that teachers' abilities to explain the competencies varied. Some parents who reported that they were very involved with their child's learning believed that the grading system was relatively accurate. They could see exactly which standards the child had to master and were grateful to teachers for their formative feedback.



Figure 10

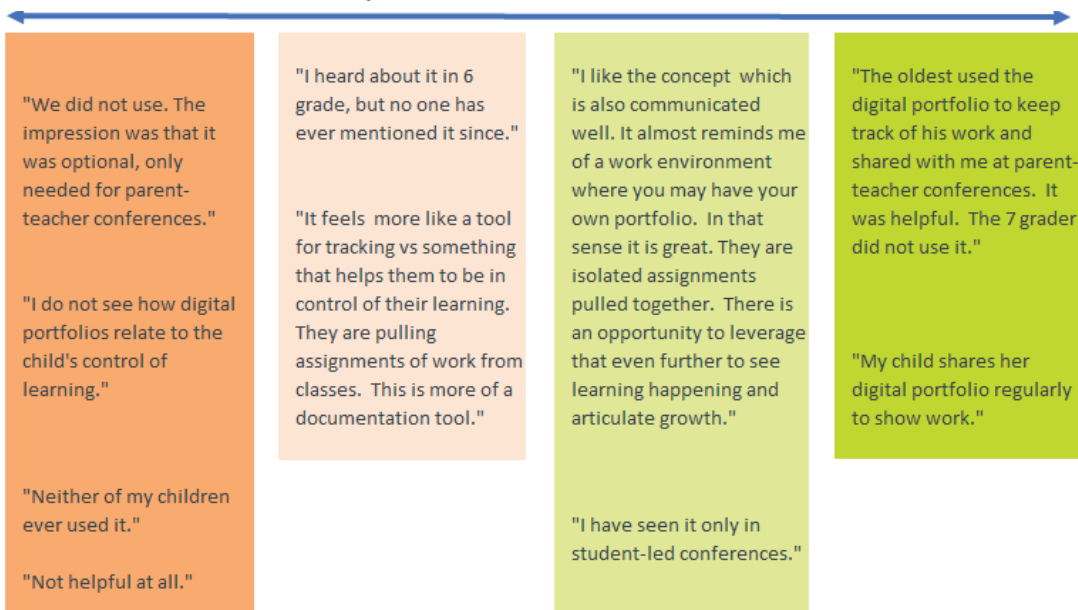
Parents' perception of the grading system varied from lack of understanding to feeling that the grading system was relatively accurate



### Parents' Perceptions of Digital Portfolios

Another issue that parents discussed in focus groups was student use of digital portfolios, which the school utilized to engage students in the learning process. We saw a wide range of opinions—some revealed parents' feelings that the digital portfolios were optional and not related to their child being in control of their own learning, while others reflected parent perceptions that digital portfolios helped keep track of their child's work (see Figure 11). Parents seemed to agree that digital portfolios were mostly used as a documentation tool to keep track of student work and played a rather limited role in increasing student ownership of learning.

**Figure 11**  
 Parents' opinions of digital portfolios were diverse, ranging from beliefs that portfolios were optional to finding them useful for parent-teacher conferences





## Parents' Perceptions of Report Cards

The parent focus groups revealed a wide range of parent opinions about standards-based report cards: from not having seen a report card or not knowing how to interpret the grades in the report card, to concerns about the need for more details and personalized comments, to satisfaction with teacher comments and grades (see Figure 12). Parents' perceptions of the report cards reflected the need to get more detailed and more personalized teacher comments rather than using "drop-down menu" choices. Parents also expressed a need for "a section explaining how the grading system reflects the mastery of the standards" and what that means for their child.

Figure 12

Parents' perceptions of report cards varied from confusion to satisfaction



## Academic Long-Term Goals

Due to data limitations created by the pandemic, we could not measure the long-term academic goals associated with increases in proficiency, the reduction of subgroup achievement gaps over time, or increased alignment between grades and EOGs. The lack of Spring 2020 EOG test data, the reduced student participation rates in the Spring 2021 EOG tests, and other pandemic-related factors prohibited our ability to examine achievement data across time.

As an alternate indicator of the effect of the Carroll Middle School grading system, we assessed high school readiness for former Carroll Middle School students who had attended Carroll during the implementation of the competency-based grading initiative. In 2020-21, the majority (over 73%) of former Carroll students attended Sanderson and about 8% were enrolled as freshmen at Millbrook High School. Because of smaller percentages and to remove any potential high school variation from the analysis, we did not include Millbrook High School in our analysis. We restricted our analytic sample to the 2021-22 school year and students at Sanderson High School.

First, we examined the 2020-21 GPAs for Sanderson High School students who were in grades 10, 11, and 12 and compared those for two groups: those who graduated from Carroll Middle School and all other students. We did not find any significant difference in GPA between the two groups.

**Table 5**

**Carroll graduates' 2020-21 mean GPAs were similar to those of other students in Sanderson High School**

Sanderson Grade Levels	Carroll Graduates at Sanderson	All Other Sanderson Students
Grade 10	2.6	2.5
Grade 11	2.9	2.8
Grade 12	2.9	2.8

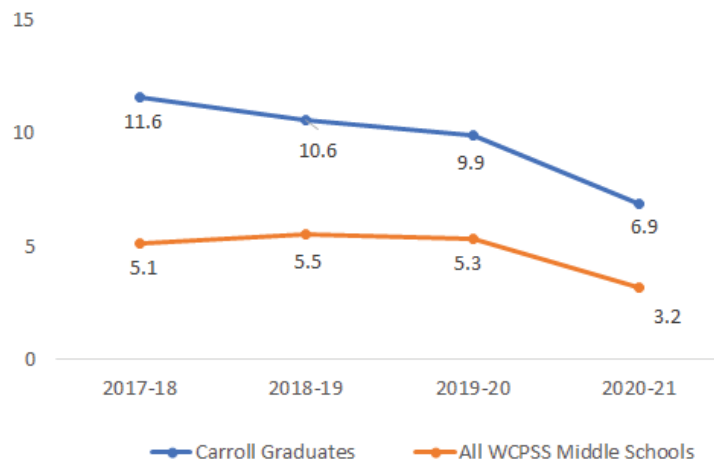


Because Sanderson High School freshmen did not have GPA data, we examined their first quarter grades in English I, Math I, and Earth Science. The results showed that in the first quarter of 2021-22, Sanderson freshmen who had attended Carroll Middle School performed similarly to other freshmen.

We also believed that grade 9 retention rates could contribute to a better understanding of Carroll graduates' performance in high school. We found that following the implementation of competency-based grading, grade 9 retention rate decreased from 2017-18 to 2020-21 for former Carroll students attending WCPSS high schools. The proportional drop in the rate was similar to that of the district as a whole. These long-term results suggest that Carroll graduates are faring just as well as other students at the high school level.

**Figure 13**

**Carroll graduates' grade 9 retention rates decreased at similar proportional rate as WCPSS**





## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to share the processes related to the implementation of the competency-based grading initiative in the context of a larger competency-based learning approach implemented at Carroll Middle School and to create an awareness of these processes among the district leadership.

In 2017-18, the Carroll Middle School leadership expressed concern over a lack of alignment between the teacher assigned grades and the EOG results and noted that the students' perceptions of ownership of their learning and students' feelings that they have a say about what happens to them at school were low. To resolve these issues, the staff implemented a competency-based learning approach and a corresponding competency-based grading practice to improve teaching and learning. This allowed teachers to tighten the alignment of instruction to the North Carolina standards and give the students improved opportunities to achieve mastery of the standards.

According to the competency-based grading pathway of change, one of the main instructional goals was to consistently deliver instruction and conduct assessments based on specific standards. In Spring 2020, to gain insights into the instructional process, we examined archived PLT minutes and observed grade-level PLT meetings. We found out that teachers consistently referenced standards when developing weekly instruction and assessments aligned with the standards, ensuring students had enough opportunities to demonstrate mastery. Archived PLT minutes showed evidence of referencing standards-based instruction within at least two-thirds of the

observed PLT sessions as well as the use of assessment data to develop or implement instructional strategies within the vast majority of PLT sessions. Further, our observational findings revealed that PLT discussions in the spring of 2020 virtual environment explicitly focused on designing or utilizing instructional activities aligned with standards, developing and implementing shared assessments, and reviewing strategies to improve student engagement. While the discussions reflected planning of instruction and assessments in accordance with the standards and grading policy, the number of PLTs that incorporated explicit discussions of the standards was somewhat lower than expected. These counts included only the specific instances when 'standards' or 'competencies' were mentioned and then recorded by the observers; thus, counts may underrepresent the frequency of discussions on standards.

Additionally, the findings of this report reflect changes in stakeholders' perceptions of learning and teaching processes during the first years of implementation of the competency-based grading initiative. After three years of implementation, according to the survey results an increase in staff support and buy-in of the competency-based grading initiative at the school was evident. Student perceptions of grades doing a good job measuring what they were able to do and feelings of ownership of their own learning also improved.

We used surveys to examine student and teacher satisfaction with the grading system, teacher perceptions of how well report cards reflected actual student learning and students' feelings of ownership of their learning. In 2018-19, when the new grading practice was first introduced, teacher perceptions of the grading system were low and improved considerably by 2019-20. However, even with the large

improvement, slightly less than half of Carroll Middle School teachers were satisfied with the grading system in 2019-20, with satisfaction levels still lagging behind the district levels. Among other reasons, this may have been related to the increased volume of work for teachers who provided descriptive feedback on each standard to students. Teacher perceptions of the report cards dramatically improved in 2019-20 compared to the previous year. Still, only half of the teachers agreed that report cards reflected actual student learning, with the agreement percentages approaching district levels. This suggests that ownership and buy-in for the initiative may still be relatively fragile.

Student survey results showed positive trends, with the growth in satisfaction with grading system being evident. Students felt that the grades in their classes did a good job of measuring what they were able to do. Survey results also showed that students' feelings of ownership of their learning improved in 2019-20 and 2020-21.

We also examined student proficiency in digital portfolio use. According to teachers, Carroll Middle School students used digital portfolios more extensively than other middle school students in WCPSS. Students not only used their digital portfolios to store their assignments and receive teacher feedback, but also utilized them to track their progress and set their learning goals. Over half of Carroll Middle School teachers indicated that their students were either proficient or advanced in all levels of digital portfolio use, compared to only about a quarter (28%) of middle school teachers in WCPSS.

At the same time, parents remained somewhat unsure about the value of digital portfolios, seeing them only as a documentation tool.



In Fall 2021 we invited parents to participate in focus groups so we could collect data on parent perceptions of the grading system. Many of the parents who volunteered to participate shared that the grading system felt vague, difficult to understand, and often lagged behind student learning. To better understand how to interpret specific grades and how they could support their children, parents had to contact individual teachers and hold in-depth discussions of the standards. Two parents reported that they had a good understanding but only “after extensive conversations with individual teachers.” It felt confusing that if a standard was not fully taught, a student could not “meet the standard” even with all assignments submitted on time. As with the survey findings for staff, this suggests some additional work needs to be done around parent buy-in. Sharing the positive outcomes for students once they reach high school may help to allay parent concerns about the grading system.

## NEXT STEPS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation science suggests that it takes three to five years for full implementation of a significant change initiative (Fixsen et al., 2005). It takes time for the staff to fully internalize and implement new ways of planning and delivering instruction, designing assessment, and implementing grading. For students who were accustomed to traditional grading at the middle school level, transitioning to a competency-based system required the students to learn new ways of approaching learning tasks based on standards and understand how they can achieve and demonstrate mastery. This was especially challenging when much of the instruction quickly shifted to a remote learning environment.

Carroll Middle School implemented a thorough approach to using the standards and competencies to ensure students’ mastery of skills. The school’s competency-based grading approach was supported by the belief that every student can achieve mastery if provided appropriate instructional support. This grading system was additionally supported by the use of digital portfolios and the Empower learning system. These electronic resources allowed teaching, learning, and assessing student learning to be more transparent for teachers, students, and parents. In 2020-21, Carroll Middle was at the early stages of implementation, working towards its goals of ensuring a better match of grades to EOGs, making the grades a better communication tool, and improving students’ feelings of ownership of their learning.

The 2020-21 school year was a year of pandemic and remote learning, and as such, EOG results reflected the challenges of the 2020-21 school year, with comparisons to the previous years not being possible. However, analysis showed that Carroll Middle School graduates enrolled at Sanderson High School during Fall 2021 had GPAs similar to other Sanderson students, and Sanderson freshmen who had attended Carroll Middle School received grades similar to other freshmen, suggesting that their experience at Carroll prepared them equally well for the rigors of high school.

Recommendations for next steps include the following:

- Consider creating more opportunities for teachers to address any concerns they may have about the grading process or report cards since only half of Carroll Middle School teachers expressed satisfaction with the grading system or believed report cards reflected students’ actual learning.



- Provide more information with examples accessible to parents, with additional support for incoming grade 6 parents to gain a better understanding of the grading scale and grading system and ways to better understand the standards. These supports should include discussions of efficient ways to support their children's learning in the competency-grading environment, address timeliness of grades and expectations for the report cards and the transition to traditional high school grading. Continue monitoring parent satisfaction levels with the current grading system either through surveys or focus groups to evaluate any progress achieved toward this long-term goal.
- Maintain consistent focus on standards and competencies within subject area PLTs' weekly planning discussions of instruction and assessments to ensure standards are explicitly addressed.
- Additionally, given the fact that Carroll Middle School students seem to perform comparatively well when transitioning to high school, district leadership should maintain the competency-based grading initiative at Carroll Middle School and consider piloting the use of this initiative at additional schools. We recommend that schools selected for implementation of this initiative have strong leadership and staff support. A pilot could be rolled out starting with a single entry grade level, i.e., 6th grade, to reduce the amount of training involved. Implementation may also be combined with the use of the Empower learning platform and a wider use of digital portfolios to create a way for students to access learning, share their progress, and support students' feelings of ownership of their learning.





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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Literature Review

Beginning in 1897 teachers in the United States have used letter grades as the primary indicator to describe students' school performance in various content areas such as English Language Arts and Mathematics (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Traditional grading practices, which are implemented in the nation, use letters (A, B, C, D, and F) in tandem with established numerical ranges (e.g., 0-100) to express students' performance on assignments (Randall and Engelhard, 2010). Although traditional grading practices have served as the primary reporting system, they include the combination of academic as well as non-academic factors like behavior, homework assignments, class participation, compliance with teachers' directives, and punctuality to class (Fisher et al., 2011; Guskey, 2002, 2011; Vatterott, 2009). While merging students' academic and non-academic factors represents one pitfall found in traditional grading practices, grading on a curve, averages, zero grades, grade inflation, and weighting systems have contributed to making final grades inadequate measures of student learning (Brookhart, 2004; Erickson, 2011; Guskey, 2000, 2011; Marzano, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002; Wormeli, 2017).

One response for turning grades into meaningful data points rests with implementation of standards-based grading. Standards-based grading reports students' academic learning progression using curriculum standards separately from non-academic factors (Beatty, 2013; Brookhart, 2011; Buckmiller et al., 2017). "It is changing

an age-old approach to assessing children from the traditional letter grades A, B, C, D, and F to a scoring system that rates children on individual standards" (Cherniss, 2008, p. 6). School districts across the nation have adopted standards-based grading for various reasons such as:

- to focus instruction and assessment on a set of curriculum standards,
- to encourage teachers to operationally establish set criteria for students to attain in a course and grade, and
- to increase effective communication with students and parents (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

In a study of standards-based grading practices in one middle school, Kirk (2019) explored student achievement in English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments and their impact on student motivation. The results indicated that the implementation of standards-based grading increased student achievement in English/Language Arts and Mathematics and that students felt motivated to learn in school ( $r_s = .259$ ,  $p = 0.45$ ). Researchers found that standards-based grading practices strengthened learning and teaching by:

- improving teachers' ability to provide specific feedback on mastery or non-mastery of curriculum standards (Beatty, 2013; Munoz & Guskey, 2015; Brookhart, 2011; Buckmiller et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2017),
- providing well-defined instructional goals (Miller, 2013; Schmoker & Marzano, 2003; Spencer, 2012) and
- aligning to statewide standardized school report cards (Heflebower et al., 2018; Schimmer, 2014; Swan et al. 2014).



## APPENDIX B

Figure B1

### Logic Model for the Competency-Based Grading Initiative at Carroll Middle School

**Need:** Mismatch between EOG scores and student grades. In 2017-18, 58.8% of students were proficient in reading and 38.6% were proficient in math. However, 76% of students received a C or greater in reading and 55% in math. Thus, report cards were not an accurate communication tool to students and parents. Furthermore, less than half (45%) of grade 8 students reported that the grades in their classes "do a good job of measuring what [they are] able to do" compared to 62% within the district. Many students did not feel ownership over their learning. A lower percentage of students agreed with the statement "I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school," 41% compared to 54% within the district.

Inputs	Strategies	Short-term Goals 2018-19	Intermediate Goals 2019-20	Long-term Goals 2020-21
PLT and leadership created:  • Instruction tied to standards: target specific areas of weakness and advancement, personalization model • Unit level pre and post assessments • Grading rubrics by standard • Competency-based report card 2019-20	Instructional units reflect standards  Use of assessment data to personalize instruction  Communication to all stakeholders via competency-based report card  Student digital portfolios used to develop student ownership over their learning  Quarterly student led conferences with parents	22% of teachers report grades do a good job of measuring student progress  45% of students report "The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I am able to do"  60% of parents report that school's system of evaluating students is fair  Parents report satisfaction with report card  Student digital portfolios created for 90% of students  90% of students participate in student led conferences  50% of students report using their digital portfolios to share learning progress with teachers, parents, and other students  42% of students agree with the statement "I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school"	90% of observed PLT utilize instructional units that reflect standards/competencies  75% of observed PLTs are using unit assessment data to target specific areas of weakness and advancement  33% of teachers report grades do a good job of measuring student progress  45% of students report "The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I am able to do"  60% of parents report that school's system of evaluating students is fair  *Parents report improved satisfaction with report cards  *Students report digital portfolios improve their ownership over their learning  45% of students agree with the statement "I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school"  60% of teachers report their students using their digital portfolios to share learning progress with teachers, parents, and other students	Grades aligned with EOGs:  Increase in alignment between grades and EOGs by subgroup  Increase in students who are proficient in reading and in math  increase in students meeting or exceeding standards EVAAS  Grades are a good communication tool:  50% increase of students who report "The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I am able to do"  40% increase of parents who report grades do a good job of measuring student progress  Students have ownership over their learning:  50% increase in students agreeing with the statement "I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school"

Note: \* Indicates goals that could not be measured due to the Pandemic.





# APPENDIX C

## A Sample Report Card

ELA 6		Q1	
	Lvl	Prg	
Analyzing Language		1.00	
Analyzing Text Elements			
Articulating Claims, Evidence, and Reasoning			
Citing and Analyzing Evidence		2.50	
Comparing & Contrasting Texts			
Craft and Structure		2.50	
Interpreting Theme and Central Idea			
Summarizing Text		2.50	
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use		2.50	
Writing		2.00	
<b>Current Course Score</b>		<b>2.17</b>	
<b>Student Pace</b>		<b>Behind pace</b>	
Exploring Animal & Plant Science		Q1	
	Lvl	Prg	
Animal Science		3.00	
Plant Science		3.50	
<b>Current Course Score</b>		<b>3.25</b>	
<b>Student Pace</b>		<b>On pace</b>	
Math 6+		Q1	
	Lvl	Prg	
Expressions and Equations			
Geometry			
Ratio and Proportional Relationships			
Statistics and Probability		2.50	
The Number System		3.00	
<b>Current Course Score</b>		<b>2.75</b>	
<b>Student Pace</b>		<b>On pace</b>	
PE 6		Q1	
	Lvl	Prg	
Motor Skills		3.00	
Movement Concepts		2.50	
Personal/Social Responsibility		2.50	
<b>Current Course Score</b>		<b>2.67</b>	
<b>Student Pace</b>		<b>On pace</b>	
Science 6		Q1	
	Lvl	Prg	
Analyzing Text Elements			
Articulating Claims, Evidence, and Reasoning			
Citing and Analyzing Evidence		2.50	
Civics and Government			
Comparing & Contrasting Texts			
Craft and Structure			
Culture		2.50	
Economic Influence			
Historical & Modern Achievements			
Historical Inquiry			
Interpreting Theme and Central Idea			
Physical & Human Geography		3.50	
Religious & Cultural Behaviors			
Societal Structures & Change			
Summarizing Text			
Vocabulary Acquisition and Use			
Writing		2.00	
<b>Current Course Score</b>		<b>2.63</b>	
<b>Student Pace</b>		<b>Behind pace</b>	
Content Area Comments			
CTE LVL			
CMS Exploring Animal and Plant Science - 2 - [REDACTED] Student shows strong interest and participation.			
ELA LVL			
CMS English Language Arts Grade 6 - 4 - [REDACTED] Disruptive behavior negatively affects student performance.			
CMS English Language Arts Grade 6 - 4 - [REDACTED] Your student is currently behind pace but is likely to regain pace ahead of the end of the school year based on demonstrated work completion and existing content mastery.			



A Sample Report Card (continued)

Content Area Comments	
<b>Hlth &amp; PE LVL</b>	
CMS Health & Physical Education: Grade 6 - 1 - [REDACTED]	Proficient evidence is being completed by the student with adequate progress being made towards completion of learning targets.
<b>Math LVL</b>	
Core 2 [REDACTED]	Proficient evidence is being completed by the student with adequate progress being made towards completion of learning targets.
<b>Science LVL</b>	
CMS Science Grade 6 - 3 - [REDACTED]	Your student is currently behind pace but is likely to regain pace ahead of the end of the school year based on demonstrated work completion and existing content mastery.
<b>Soc Stud LVL</b>	
CMS Social Studies Grade 6 - 1 - [REDACTED]	Student is a leader and serves as a positive example for other students.
CMS Social Studies Grade 6 - 1 - [REDACTED]	Your student is currently behind pace but is likely to regain pace ahead of the end of the school year based on demonstrated work completion and existing content mastery.



## APPENDIX D

### A Sample of Grade 8 Social Studies Competency Rubric

COMPETENCY: Student can write arguments to evaluate factors that have led to conflict, change, and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.

State Standard (ex., 8.C.1.1)	Student can...	...and	...and
	Progressing	Meeting	Exceeding (in addition to "Meeting")
8.H.2	Student can identify the conflict, compromise and negotiation that have shaped North Carolina and the United States.	Student can describe the ways in which conflict, compromise and negotiation have shaped North Carolina and the United States.	Student can evaluate and prioritize the conflict, compromise and negotiation that have shaped North Carolina and the United States.
8.H.2.2	Student can list leadership and citizen actions that influenced the outcome of key conflicts in North Carolina and the United States.	Student can summarize how leadership and citizen actions influenced the outcome of key conflicts in North Carolina and the United States.	Student can determine how leadership and citizen actions influenced the outcome of key conflicts in North Carolina and the United States.
8.H.2.3	Student can repeat the role of debate, compromise, and negotiation during significant periods in the history of North Carolina and the United States.	Student can summarize the role of debate, compromise, and negotiation during significant periods in the history of North Carolina and the United States.	Student can evaluate the significant role of debate, compromise, and negotiation during significant periods in the history of North Carolina and the United States through
WHST.6-8.1	Student can write arguments focused on discipline-specific content. Each of the following elements are present in her/his writing: A) Introduce claims about a topic or issues. B) Support claims with logical reasoning using credible sources. C) Address relationships among claims with evidence. D) Attempts to maintain a formal style. E) Provide a concluding statement.	Student can write arguments focused on discipline-specific content. A) Introduce claims about a topic or issues, acknowledge and distinguish the claims from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. B) Support claims with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources; C) Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence. D) Establish and maintain a formal style; E) Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.	Student can evaluate and critique the elements of her/his arguments, as well as assist peers in assessing their written work.
RH.6-8.6	Student can identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts) with support.	Student can identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts.)	Student can construct a claim using aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose to support that claim.
8.H.3	Student can identify the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.	Student can articulate the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.	Student can compare, contrast and evaluate the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States





Dina Bulgakov Cooke, Ph.D., Colleen Paepflow, Ph.D.,  
James Carter

Data, Research, and Accountability Department

Timothy R. Belton, Ed.D.

Research Intern (WCPSS Assistant Principal)

Wake County Public School System

Cary, North Carolina

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