A Review of Alternative Grading Systems

Prepared for Community Lab School

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Mandatory Disclaimer:

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

Honor Statement:

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Christine Leech

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Finally, to TVDCRBS: You have made these last two years so fun and full of joy. Everyone should be so lucky to go through graduate school with such a brilliant group of friends.

Dedication:

This report is dedicated to August Guion. I hope that you grow up in a society where every child has the opportunity to attend a school committed to providing an equitable educational experience that centers student learning.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
- Nelson Mandela

"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education."
- Martin Luther King Jr.

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Executive Summary:

For almost a century, American public schools have used traditional grading methods to evaluate students' learning. Approximately 77% of school districts evaluate their students with traditional grades, yet only 13% of educators believe they are "very effective" (Klein, 2023). Research supports these findings and concludes that traditional grades are inaccurate measurements of students' mastery that exacerbate existing inequities within the educational system. There is a growing movement for more schools to explore implementing alternative grading systems.

Community Lab School is a small liberal arts charter school in Albemarle County, Virginia, aiming to change its high school's grading system for the 2025-2026 school year. After a review of the available literature on grading reform this report identifies the following four different policy options for Community:

1. **Traditional Grading:** Assesses students through behavior, effort, and learning, typically on an A-F letter grade scale.
2. **Competency-Based Grading:** Gives students clearly defined learning objectives and evaluates the extent to which students meet them. Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery.
3. **Portfolio Grading:** Evaluates students' work over the course of a semester holistically. Educators provide students with frequent, specific, and personalized feedback, while students submit self-reflections.
4. **Contract Grading:** Collaborative process between students and educators to establish a contract detailing the requirements students must meet to achieve a certain grade.

This report evaluates how each grading policy accurately and effectively measures students' learning, as well as its impact on teachers' workload and educational equity. The evaluations also determine how well each policy aligns with Community's mission for its students and the current college application process.

Following these evaluations, this report recommends that Community Lab School implement a contract grading system within its high school courses. Contract grading emphasizes student autonomy and increases students' control over the learning process with a system that values educational equity and has more potential for long-term sustainability. For the rest of the spring and summer of 2025, Community should inform students and parents of the coming changes while redesigning courses to align with a contract grading system. During the 2025-2026 school year, Community's administration should continuously support and collect feedback from students and teachers on new grading policies.

Introduction:

Traditional grading systems, characterized by letter or numeric grades, remain the dominant method of assessment in American public schools, with approximately 77% of districts relying on these measures (Klein, 2023). However, only 13% of educators believe that traditional letter-based or numeric grades are a "very effective way" to provide feedback to students. This misalignment has sparked interest in schools across the country in investigating alternative grading models, such as competency-based and portfolio grading. Community Lab School (CLS) is a charter school within Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) that seeks to reimagine its high school grading structure to increase opportunities for deeper learning that foster equity, do not overburden teachers, and better align with its progressive educational mission.

This document provides background on the current state of Community's grading system, a history of traditional grading, an overview of potential alternative grading policies, and key takeaways for any policy redesign.

Problem Statement:

Community Lab School's current traditional grading system is an ineffective and inaccurate measurement of learning that does not align with the school's mission for its students. Although traditional grading methods have been the standard in American public schools since the 1940s, they perpetuate existing inequities in the education system for low-income students and students of color. A new grading system for Community's high school students must honor the school's commitment to equity, adhere to its evidence-based and experimental educational philosophy, and accommodate the school's broader aspirations for educational reform. Community has the opportunity to pioneer innovative grading practices for the rest of ACPS that better reflect student mastery, encourage growth, and reduce inequities.

Client Overview:

Community is a small, liberal arts charter school in Albemarle County open to all County residents through a lottery system. It has both a middle and high school, with 177 total students. Its current mission is to ensure that all students are active learners and critical thinkers, as well as open-minded and empowered individuals. Although they are comparatively less racially and economically diverse than other schools in the County, they serve more students with disabilities. Last year, Community's students outperformed both the division and state on every exam for every recorded student

demographic category on the state-required Standards of Learning Assessments (SOLs) (see Appendix A).

One of Community's most important functions is to serve as a model of experimental learning for the rest of ACPS. The school has a history of partnering with different researchers at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development as well as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which puts them in a unique position. Community can test new evidence-based learning methods that can eventually be disseminated to other County schools. In this case, if Community can prove that the changes it makes to its grading practices ultimately improve student outcomes, it can also support the case for different grading policies in the rest of the County.

Community's middle school currently operates under a competency-based grading system, which provides students with clearly defined learned objectives and evaluates the extent to which students meet them. This system relies on a growth mindset for student achievement; students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the material but must meet these standards by the end of the year. This means that students can begin the school year with relatively low scores, but improve throughout the year. Middle schoolers receive an evaluation of Mastery, Approaching Mastery, or Non-Mastery for all of their courses in addition to specific narrative feedback.

The high school program at Community is split into two phases as the core classes in grades 9-10 operate using a Project-Based Learning (PBL) curriculum, while students in grades 11-12 are in a International Baccalaureate (IB) program. During students' freshman and sophomore years, they have Project Time to work on interdisciplinary applications to real-world scenarios, satisfying credits for VA/US Government, English 9 or 10, Biology, Data Science, and their Freshman Seminar. Students also have traditional courses in math, Spanish, and creative arts electives. An example of PBL might require students to learn about the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone and how this impacted local ecosystems. They would also research the historical factors that influenced the decision and write persuasive letters to legislators. Juniors and seniors in the IB program must take IB English and History, but can take other IB courses with interdisciplinary and holistic views of subjects. There are three main components of the IB Diploma: an extended essay, development of a theory of knowledge, and creativity, activity, service (CAS).

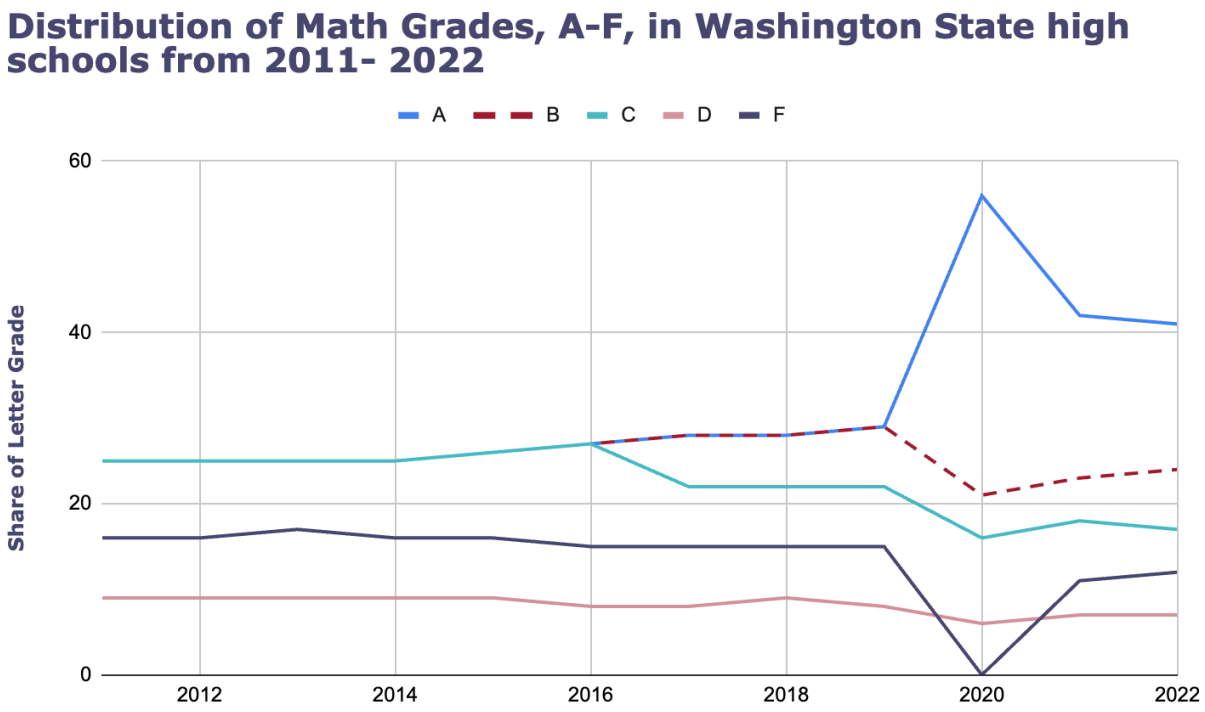
Community's high school can not implement a one-to-one adaptation of the middle school system because the school wants to maintain a traditional style transcript for students' college applications. Therefore, Community must come up with a different grading system that aligns with the school's mission for its students but still produces competitive college applicants.

Background:

Letter-grading is a relatively new phenomenon within the larger history of education institutions. Mount Holyoke College was the first U.S. institution of higher education to adopt letter-based grading in 1897, and the system became more widespread in K-12 public schools in the 1940s (School Watch, 2021). By the 1970s, approximately 80% of American schools used a traditional grading system (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Currently, the vast majority of U.S. public schools still give their students letter-grades based on an A-F system (Klein, 2023). Initially this push to increase grade standardization arose from colleges and employers' need for a system that more easily compared students (Lassahn, 2022; Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Letter grades correlated with Grade Point Averages (GPAs) are particularly useful when evaluating modern college applications, as they provide universities with a clear tool to evaluate students from different schools. In 2007, Virginia required all public secondary schools to include GPAs on students' transcripts (Va Code § 8VAC20-160-30). Despite their pervasiveness, research shows that letter grades are not necessarily reflective of student learning, leading to more schools beginning to explore alternative grading models (Cain et al., 2022).

One of the most common criticisms levied against the current education system concerns accusations of grade inflation. Grade inflation occurs when educators award students a grade higher than the quality of work or standard of learning demands. While it is difficult to consistently measure grade inflation over decades, as courses' content and level of difficulty are subject to change, a common evaluative metric compares how students' GPAs predict their scores on standardized tests (Eyler, 2024). A report sponsored by the College Board found that more high school students received As and higher GPAs from 2010 to 2022 while their ACT scores decreased, and that grade inflation worsened during the pandemic (Sanchez, 2023). Figure 1 demonstrates this change in grade distribution in math letter grades in high schools in Washington state.

Figure 1: Distribution of Math Grades, A-F, in Washington state high schools from 2011- 2022



Source: Goldhaber & Goodman, 2023

One of the biggest barriers to grading reform is the concern that it will lead to further grade inflation and further reduce standards of academic rigor (Cain et al., 2022; Hess, 2023). Guskey (2011) argues that to address these objections to grading reform, it is imperative that stakeholders first agree on what the purpose of a grade is in order to properly address concerns with the current system.

Another important consideration to grading reform is how it could potentially impact students' mental health. In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on a youth mental health crisis. Although grades are not the sole driver of this public health crisis, they contribute to existing stressors (Bouchrika, 2025). Another survey found that 61% of teenagers felt "a lot of pressure" to get good grades (Menasce-Horowitz & Graf, 2019). Grades have critical implications for students' lives long after high school ends, as they determine which colleges students can attend, how much they receive in financial aid, and future job prospects (Lynch & Hennessy, 2015). Under the traditional grading system, grades act as extrinsic motivators to students, which strongly correlates with increases in academic stress (Alyami et al., 2017; Chamberlin et al., 2018; Knesek, 2022). Schools should provide environments of psychological safety where students

should feel safe and free to make mistakes without exacerbating existing mental health issues.

As we approach almost a century of the traditional grading model in the U.S, it is clear that we must make adaptive changes to our educational system in order to best serve future generations. Community is in a unique position to implement innovative grading reforms. Its small class sizes and committed faculty make Community the perfect space to conduct necessary grading reform that can serve as a model to other local schools that change to the existing antiquated system can be successful.

An Overview of Different Grading Models:

Traditional Grading

Traditional letter grades are intended to simplify and standardize the grading process to better quantify and interpret students' learning (Cain et al., 2022). Currently, the vast majority of U.S. public schools operate under this system, including Community's high school classes and the rest of the public schools in Albemarle County (Klein, 2023). Under a traditional grading system, students are evaluated using an A-F letter scale on criteria not directly related to learning, such as assignment completion, attendance, and participation. Community's high school currently operates under this system and would not need to take further action to maintain the status quo.

Competency-Based Grading

Mastery- or Competency-based Grading (CBG) gives students clearly defined learning objectives and evaluates the extent to which students meet them. This grading system highlights a growth mindset for student achievement, where students have multiple and varied opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the material. Analysis of this alternative will also look at evidence from comparable Standards-Based Grading (SBG) systems that operate using similar philosophies.

Contrary to typical traditional grading, students' scores are not average over the course of the semester, rather they are evaluated based on how their work trends towards mastery. CBG also makes important distinctions between formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments monitor students' learning and provide early feedback for areas of improvement through homework assignments, reading quizzes, or first drafts of term papers. Summative assessments measure students' mastery or how well they meet a learning standard through midterm exams, papers, or final projects. Teachers use student's summative assessments to determine their final grade.

An example of an English class using CBG might require students to submit early iterations of a term paper at multiple points throughout the semester for feedback as teachers continuously evaluate whether their work meets high level standards for composition writing. Students would have multiple opportunities to submit their completed term paper to demonstrate their mastery, which would then determine their final grade.

If high school classes were to adopt this new system, educators would have to work with administration to redesign their coursework and evaluation systems. This new system would also need to be cohesive across all courses so that students do not have to adapt to a completely different system in every class. For example, it would create confusion if the English teacher had a credit/no credit policy, while the history teacher determined that a pass was an A and anything else was a C. This consistency is crucial both in creating a stable learning environment for students and providing a comprehensive grading scale for students' transcripts. In 2019, the Christensen Institute evaluated 173 schools claiming to use competency-based education. They found that while 75% of these schools offered multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery, only 40% had flexible schedules or advanced students who had demonstrated mastery (Waite, 2019). Although there is limited public information available on how colleges and universities evaluate alternative transcripts, it could be risky for high school seniors to submit transcripts that are not easily understandable for college admissions officers.

Portfolio Grading

Portfolios are a version of competency-based systems that enable educators to assess students' progress at different stages of learning rather than solely based on the end product. Portfolios provide high-quality feedback at multiple points throughout the class, encouraging students to view their own learning and mastery more holistically. This approach also emphasizes the student's responsibility to take more control over their learning, as they include reflections to their portfolio assessing their own progress and areas for growth. Portfolios would encompass both formative and summative assessments to create a comprehensive picture of a students' learning. Maruszczak (2008) identifies the key elements to successful portfolio grading as the following (1) Establishment of school or class-wide learning expectations and rubrics, (2) Design of high-quality portfolio tasks, (3) Integration of student reflection practices, (4) Development of portfolio review protocols for summative and formative assessment.

The administrative transition to a portfolio grading system would be the same as one to CBG. Educators would also work within their teams to adapt to a new grading policy consistent across students' classes and transcripts. The process for informing

parents and families on the policy change over the spring and summer would also be the same as it would for CBG. In practice, regular updates to students' portfolios would occur during their Project Time so teachers can monitor progress, offer formative feedback, and tailor their guidance to individual students' needs. Community would implement a model that aligns with the five step process outlined by Davis & Ponnamperuma (2005) :

1. A collection of evidence on a student's learning
2. Student's reflection on their progress
3. Teacher's evaluation of the evidence on mastery
4. Discussion of the evidence between student and teacher
5. Teacher's final assessment on some predetermined grading scale.

Contract Grading

This grading option establishes a contract between the student and the educator to determine the learning and mastery requirements necessary to earn a specific grade (Litterio, 2018). The terms of these grading contracts are decided by the teacher in collaboration with either individual students or the whole class. Teachers can provide students with options for the formats and number of assignments under each contract, but this grading policy provides students with agency over how they will be evaluated. Typically, these contracts can include self-assessments and reflections on students' learning, but the teachers ultimately make the final decisions on whether students have met the necessary requirements. Contract grading does not include any kind of grading curve as it does not place a limit on the number of students who can receive an A in the class.

It is up to the student and the teacher to design a contract that reflects the educational values present in CBG and portfolio grading. Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) propose a system where students who merely complete some minimum number of assignments automatically receive a B, while students who demonstrate high levels of mastery receive an A. This system provides students with a considerable amount of feedback and was originally intended for writing courses. Another model could prioritize student mastery and student teacher-communication for a course with longer projects. This would require the students and teacher to collaborate in designing a rubric with high standards and once the teacher determines that there is nothing left to critique, then that project receives a passing grade (*Contract Grading Schemes*, 2020). Carillo (2021) warns against any labor-based contracts that could heighten the existing inequities present in traditional grading systems. She argues that labor-based contracts particularly harm students with disabilities, who already have a greater burden to complete projects. Given Community's high population of students with disabilities, it is critical that any grading contracts focus on evaluating learning rather than the amount of labor students put into an assignment.

If Community were to implement contract grading, it would be up to the individual teacher to decide how they want to create a contract within their class. It may be that 9th and 10th grade teachers have students choose between different contracts, while 11th and 12 graders are more involved in the negotiation process. Ultimately, individual teachers will best understand the needs of the class and are capable of determining which process will best serve their students. A shift to contract grading would also require a similar process for professional development and stakeholder education as a change to CBG or portfolio grading. A crucial difference would be that this policy option does not require a substantive change to the formatting for students' transcripts, as it can still align with Community's current A-F letter grades corresponding to the 4.0 GPA scale.

Evaluative Criteria:

This section evaluates each grading method using the criteria of grade accuracy, burden on educators, equity, mission alignment, and transcript compatibility. All of these criteria align with Community's values, the broader higher education system, and the fundamental purpose of grading. Each criterion will be evaluated on a scale of 1-3.

The criteria chosen are specific to the needs of Community Lab School. Generally, costs are a crucial metric of alternatives' success, however, none of the proposed policy changes require significant costs to the school, as all of the professional development periods needed will fit into pre-existing work days.

Table One: Description of Criteria	
Criterion	**Description**
Grade Accuracy	Measures how well a grading system reflects student mastery while minimizing inconsistencies and academic dishonesty. Rated on a scale of 1-3.
Burden on Educators	Evaluates the time, effort, and administrative complexity required for teachers to implement and sustain a grading system. Rated on a scale of 1-3.
Equity	Evaluates each policy's impact on educational equity in terms of students' academic outcomes. Rated on a scale of 1-3.
Transcript Compatibility	Determines how each grading system translates to a format that colleges can easily understand. Rated on a scale of 1-3.
Mission Alignment	Measures how each grading policy aligns with the school's mission to produce active learners and critical thinkers, as well as open-minded and empowered individuals. Rated on a scale of 1 to 3.

Grade Accuracy

The criterion measures how well a grading system reflects student mastery while minimizing evaluative inconsistencies and academic dishonesty. Accurate evaluations are a core aspect to any grading system, and this criterion will include determinations for how well each grading policy can predict standardized test scores. Although standardized test scores are an imperfect metric of evaluation, they remain one of the most common methods to evaluate students' learning (Cain et al., 2022; Goldhaber & Young, 2023; Sanchez, 2023).

This criterion will also encompass the potential for cheating under each grading system. If a grading policy incentivizes more students to cheat to get higher grades, then it creates an inaccurate reflection of students' mastery. A policy receives a 3 if the system leads to highly accurate grades, a 1 for inaccurate grades, and a 2 for mixed evidence or a neutral impact on accuracy.

Burden on Educators

One of Community's administration's greatest priorities for any policy change is that it does not place an undue burden on teachers. Teachers are a direct point of contact for students' and parents' questions about academic policies, meaning that they will likely play a significant role in justifying policy changes. Although the nature of change in a grading policy is that teachers must be at the center of such efforts, they are

still one of the most important stakeholder groups and their buy-in is crucial. This criterion evaluates the time, effort, and administrative complexity required for teachers to implement and sustain a grading system. A policy receives a 3 if the system places a low administrative burden on teachers, a 1 for high administrative burden, and a 2 for mixed evidence or a neutral impact on educators.

Equity

The National Education Project defines educational equity as the extent to which children have the resources they need to develop their full academic and social potential (NEP, 2024). This criterion will evaluate each policy's impact on educational equity in terms of students' academic outcomes. I will find evidence for each policy's effect on factors such as class grades and state-issued test scores. I will then compare these results across different racial, economic, and ability-based demographics. A policy receives a 3 if the system leads to highly equitable impacts, a 1 for inequitable impact, and a 2 for mixed evidence or a neutral impact on educational equity.

Although Community's student population is less racially and economically diverse than the rest of ACPS, a disproportionately higher number of students have a disability (VDoE, 2025). Ensuring educational equity within its school is always a fundamental tenant in the school's mission, regardless of its current demographics. Additionally, this report is also mindful of future policy applications for the rest of the County, where racial and socioeconomic educational equity concerns would be more pressing.

Transcript Readability

The number of students applying to college has skyrocketed in recent years, which can make unique or alternative transcripts a logistical and administrative burden during the admissions process (Nadworny, 2025). The transcript readability criterion determines how easily a grading system aligns with traditional A-F grading and 4.0 GPA scales that clearly translate information to college admissions officers. A policy receives a 3 if the policy closely aligns traditional transcripts and a 1 for transcript misalignment.

Mission Alignment

I will also measure how each grading policy aligns with Community's mission to produce active learners and critical thinkers, as well as open-minded and empowered individuals. This criterion includes evaluations of each policy's philosophy and structure as well as a review of the evidence on the alternatives' impact on student characteristics. For example, I will analyze the relationship between various grading policies and students' intrinsic motivation to measure how each alternative supports students as active learners. A policy receives a 3 if the policy closely aligns with Community's mission, a 1 for mission misalignment, and a 2 for mixed evidence or a neutral impact on Community's mission.

Evaluating Alternatives

Table Two: Description of Alternatives	
Alternative	**Description**
Traditional Grading	Assesses students through behavior, effort, and learning, typically on a A-F letter grade scale.
Competency-Based Grading	Gives students clearly defined learning objectives and evaluates the extent to which students meet them. Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery.
Portfolio Grading	Evaluates students' work over the course of a semester holistically. Educators provide students with frequent, specific, and personalized feedback, while students submit self-reflections.
Contract Grading	Collaborative process between students and educators to establish a contract detailing the requirements students must meet to achieve a certain grade.

Alternative One: Status Quo– Traditional Grading

Grade Accuracy: 1

Traditional letter grades receive a score of 1 for grade accuracy because they correlate weakly with standardized test performance, incentivize academic dishonesty, and do not consistently reflect student mastery. Research shows that letter grades include factors unrelated to learning and are often subjective across teachers and courses. For example, Guskey & Link (2018) found that teachers evaluate about 10-20% of a student's final grade using non-cognitive factors unrelated to mastery, such as class participation and meeting deadlines. Another study found that teachers using traditional grades were significantly more likely to pass failing students who did not reach the required standards of learning (Plourde, 2021). Traditional grades also create inconsistent assessments of student learning (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cain et al., 2022). For example, an A grade in an AP World History course from a teacher in Norfolk, Virginia may not equate to an A from a teacher leading the same course in Richmond, Virginia due to differences in grading practices and expectations.

Additionally, traditional grades do not reliably predict standardized test performance (Sanchez, 2023; Sanchez & Moore, 2022). Since the 2020-2021 school year, students' average high school GPAs increased while average ACT scores declined (Goldhaber & Young, 2023; Sanchez, 2023). These grading inaccuracies do not give teachers or parents and guardians a good understanding of their students' learning (*B-Flation: How Good Grades Can Sideline Parents*, 2023*;* Dorn et al., 2021; Goldhaber & Young, 2023).

Traditional grading structures also create strong incentives for academic dishonesty. A survey from 2023 revealed that approximately 60 to 70% of American high school students admitted to academic dishonesty within the past month (Spector, 2023). These instances of academic dishonesty increased during the pandemic in both secondary and higher education (Dey, 2021; Southers, 2023). High letter grades and GPAs are crucial for modern college admissions and scholarships, and students in a traditional system can prioritize performance over learning and academic honesty (Anderman & Koenka, 2017; Butler & Nisan, 1986). Traditional grading also does not give students opportunities to learn from mistakes without penalty, which can reinforce fears of failure and discourage risk-taking in learning (Eyler, 2024; Nunes et al., 2024). As a result, teachers struggle to discern whether high grades reflect students' true understanding or strategic behaviors.

Burden on Educators: 3

One advantage of traditional grading is that it allows teachers to quickly assign letter grades based on participation, assignment completion, and test performance without detailed feedback (Klein, 2023). Traditional grading still requires considerable effort to calculate grades, weigh different assignment types, and address student and parent concerns. However, compared to alternatives that require more in-depth, specific narrative evaluations, traditional grading is often viewed as more time-efficient. In fact, Klein (2023) found that approximately one in five educators believes that one of the biggest benefits to traditional grading is that it requires less work than narrative reports. Approximately 71% of teachers spend an average of five hours a week working outside of normal school hours, suggesting that traditional grading generally fits within their normal workload (*1st Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey: 2022 Results*, 2022*;* McShane, 2022). Additionally, 77% of educators reported that their districts already use either an A-F or numeric grading system (Klein, 2023). Overall, traditional grading presents a low burden on educators with a score of 3, as it is the dominant and overwhelmingly familiar system that requires no class restructuring.

Equity: 1

Traditional grading is inequitable because it disproportionately disadvantages students from historically marginalized backgrounds, reinforcing existing academic gaps. Research shows that Black, Brown, disabled, and low-income students receive lower grades that are not directly correlated to mastery of material, indicating that traditional grading reflects systemic biases rather than objective learning outcomes (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Pak & Parsons, 2020; Reardon et al., 2017; Rhodes, 2021; Quinn, 2020). These inequities begin early in students' academic careers and continue into higher education. For example, family income is a strong predictor of students' academic performance beginning in Kindergarten and continuing into college. (Michaels & Milner, 2021; Reardon, 2011). These scores can reflect opportunity gaps rather than actual ability (Shukla et al., 2022). Although traditional grades can predict standardized test scores, these correlations are much weaker for students of color and low-income students (Brennan et al., 2001; Haptonstall, 2010). This grading system also reinforces a punitive approach to assessment that disproportionately affects students

with disabilities and students of color, who are 22% more likely to be found disruptive (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Marchbanks et al., 2016).

Traditional grading systems include penalties for late work or behavioral factors that can further disadvantage students with executive functioning challenges or those who lack external academic support (Cain et al., 2022). In extreme cases, grades have even been used as a tool for surveillance. In 2020, a school district in Florida worked with law enforcement to track students with low grades as potential criminal risks without their parents' knowledge (Bedi & McGrory, 2020). Given the evidence of how a traditional grading system exacerbates inequities, it receives a score of 1.

Transcript Compatibility: 3

Because traditional grades are the national norm for high school transcripts, this alternative scores a 3 for high transcript compatibility. It's projected that 19.2 million students enrolled in college in 2024, and college admissions officers already have robust evaluative systems for these students' transcripts (Hanson, 2024). Unlike alternative grading models that may require additional conversion or explanation, traditional grades fit into existing admissions frameworks without creating additional confusion or administrative burden for college admissions officers.

Mission Alignment: 1

The traditional grading method does not align with any part of Community's mission. By incentivizing performance over growth, traditional grades discourage intellectual risk-taking and active learning, as students focus more on grades than on engagement with material (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Koenka, 2019). Without opportunities for revision or meaningful feedback, students are less likely to develop persistence and critical thinking skills (O'Neil, 2017). Additionally, inaction regarding educational equity concerns with traditional grading does not model open-mindedness and cultural understanding to students. Finally, because grades are often influenced by behavioral expectations and external resources rather than mastery alone, traditional grading disempowers students and makes them feel as if their academic success is determined by external factors rather than their own growth and effort (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Therefore, traditional grades receive a 1 for mission alignment.

Alternative Two: Competency-Based Grading

Grade Accuracy: 3

Competency-based grading scores a 3 in grade accuracy because it accurately measures student mastery, aligns with students' standardized test performance, and reduces incentives for academic dishonesty. Unlike traditional grading, CBG only measures how students' work aligns with clear, standardized learning objectives (Guskey et al., 2011; Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). Research shows that students' competency-based report card scores also strongly predict standardized test performance. In Hardegree's (2012) study, researchers found that competency-based report cards could predict scores on Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), and that these students frequently outperformed CRCT state averages. Pollio and Hochbein (2015) found that implementing CBG in urban high schools' Algebra 2

courses doubled the pass rate on state standardized exams. These findings indicate that CBG structures not only grow learning, but provide consistently accurate predictors of students' knowledge across high schools.

CBG also increases students' intrinsic motivation which helps curb academic dishonesty. Students motivated by mastery are significantly less likely to participate in academic cheating than extrinsically motivated individuals (Davy et al., 2007; Jordan, 2001; Murdock et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 1993). One study found that extrinsically motivated students were approximately 57% more likely to engage in cheating than intrinsically motivated students (Anderman et al., 1998). Another study found that after implementing CBG, students experienced increased understanding of learning goals, heightened intrinsic motivation, and decreased stress from transparent grading practices (Bub, 2021). CBG is an overall highly accurate grading system due to its strong ability to predict standardized test scores, reduce grading inconsistencies, and discourage academic dishonesty.

Burden on Educators: 1

Competency-based grading receives a score of 1 for the high burden it imposes on educators and the significant time, training, and structural changes required for implementation. Teachers are responsible for redesigning courses and assessments, addressing student and parent misconceptions, and supporting student development (Le et al., 2014; Ryan & Cox, 2017; Scheopner Torres et al., 2018). A comprehensive report on New England schools found that the transition phase was the most difficult stage, as teachers had to work more hours to navigate new instructional strategies, recalibrate grading expectations, and manage increased administrative complexity (Sturgis, 2016). The challenges of CBG adoption are also evident in New Hampshire school districts where six years after implementation began, the transition was still incomplete. The key obstacles largely stemmed from teachers balancing increased workloads and hours while addressing student and parent misconceptions about grading expectations (Scheopner Torres et al., 2018).

Additionally, Knight and Cooper (2019) found that Irish high school teachers implementing CBG experienced an "implementation dip," where rapid changes led to higher stress levels, inconsistent application across classrooms, and resistance from both educators and community members. Another study found that one-third of the teachers resistant to implementation cited ideological reasons about academic rigor (Hill, 2018). However, as classroom management improves, the grading practices eventually stabilize (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Plourde (2021) also found that educators using CBG are significantly more likely to confer with their colleagues on their grading criteria. Community teachers already have daily meetings with their teaching teams, so this system could align with pre-existing collaborative processes. While CBG may reduce grading disputes in the long run, the substantial upfront demands make it a high-burden system.

Equity: 3

This alternative is highly equitable with a score of 3 because it reduces academic gaps, provides meaningful accommodations, and minimizes bias in grading. Students of

color and low-income students are more likely to come from classrooms with fewer academic support resources than White and higher-income students (Rothstein, 2014; Stanford CEPA, 2024). The CBG grading model creates a more equitable education experience for these students because it emphasizes mastery over a one-time performance. Additionally, CBG does not include any of the subjective measures, such as participation, attendance, or behavior; rather it applies clear, consistent learning standards that reduce disparities in how students are assessed unlike traditional grading, which often embeds subjective biases (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). It also gives students multiple opportunities to show their growth in learning over time, which can provide more flexibility for students with disabilities to demonstrate their mastery (Jung & Guskey, 2007).

Schools implementing CBG saw reductions in racial and income-based achievement gaps, as it ensures grades reflect actual learning rather than access to resources or test-taking ability (Hardegree, 2012; Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). These findings are supported by Hartman & Eicheler (2024), who found that equity gaps narrowed for students of color as well as first-generation and students on financial aid The students who met all three criteria received the most benefits from CBG, as they improved their score by 11.5 percentage points compared to the corresponding control group's score on the final exam. Another study on CBG in an introductory collegiate physics class found similar levels of benefits for women and first-generation students (Richard et al., 2022).

Transcript Compatibility: 1

Because CBG evaluates students' overall mastery, teachers do not typically add the traditional A-F to students' transcripts. Most CBG courses grade students using mastery-based labels on a pass/fail or credit/no credit system (Evans, 2019). These may require additional context or conversion when reviewed alongside traditional transcripts (Larson, 2023). While CBG provides a more accurate reflection of student learning, it does not clearly align with standardized college admissions frameworks, which could put applicants at a perceived disadvantage. Therefore, CBG has a low rating of 1 for transcript compatibility.

Mission Alignment: 3

Competency-based grading closely aligns with all parts of Community's mission for its students. CBG encourages more active learning and scholarship because it eliminates the extrinsic motivation of traditional grading and increases students' intrinsic motivation to be active learners and critical thinkers (Anderson, 1998; Bub, 2021). Additionally, Simonds et al. (2017) found that students' time management skills and planning skills improved, indicating that students are becoming more autonomous learners. Bandura (1997) measured students' self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to successfully complete tasks, and found positive correlations between CBG and reports of self-efficacy. These findings are backed up by Knight and Cooper (2019) who found that CBG led to more purposeful teaching practices. This approach also fosters an open or growth mindset for both students and teachers and increases pupils' empowerment. Overall, CBG scores a 3 on mission alignment.

Alternative Three: Portfolio Grading

Grade Accuracy: 2

There is mixed evidence on how portfolio grades would increase grading accuracy in Community. While the causal evidence for portfolio grading in high school settings is limited, one quasi-experimental study found that college students using portfolio grading benefited from more holistic evaluations, increased self-reflections, and greater teacher-student collaboration (Birgin & Baki, 2007). Additionally, O'Brien et al. (2016) found that in a medical school setting, portfolio reviews helped faculty better identify and agree on the competency level of students in need of remediation, suggesting that portfolio grading can provide a more accurate picture of student progress. However, the available information on the consistency of using portfolio grades to predict standardized test scores is mixed, and most studies rely on relatively small sample sizes dissimilar to Community's classrooms (Gadbury‐Amyot et al., 2014; Nezakatgoo, 2011; O'Sullivan et al., 2012).

Although portfolio grading cannot prevent a student from cheating on an individual assignment, it provides similar levels of intrinsic motivation as CBG. This area of literature needs more studies on links between portfolio grading and instances of cheating, but there is evidence that affirms its positive effects on students' intrinsic motivation (O'Brien et al., 2016; Zaabalawi & Zaabalawi, 2024). However, due to the lack of robust evidence connecting portfolio grading to cheating or standardized test outcomes, this alternative scores a 2 for grade accuracy.

Burden on Educators: 2

The policy implementation of portfolio grading requires an initial investment of time and effort from educators, as it necessitates restructuring coursework, developing standardized rubrics, and providing detailed formative feedback (Paulson et al., 1991; Maruszczak, 2008). Teachers must also navigate external pressures from parents and align portfolios with traditional grading expectations (Sarroub et al., 1997). However, while portfolio grading demands more effort in the early stages, research suggests that the long-term grading burden may not be significantly greater than traditional exams. Law and Eckes (2007) argue that portfolio grading is time-intensive due to the depth of feedback required, but Ray et al. (2018) counter that grading a portfolio throughout the semester is comparable to grading midterms and finals. Additionally, Vigeant (2021) found that portfolio grading in a chemical engineering course was no more time-consuming than traditional final exam grading, especially when exams required detailed rubrics and partial credit evaluation.

Despite potential increases to teachers' workload, implementing portfolio grading into Community' classes may align well with the pre-existing PBL learning environment as regular portfolio updates during Project Time could help distribute the grading workload more evenly. Additionally, providing more detailed feedback earlier in the semester can also reduce grading burdens later, as students make fewer repeated mistakes (De Fina, 1992; Lustig, 1996; Nasab, 2015; Vigeant, 2021). While the initial transition may take more time, the ability to assess student progress incrementally and to promote self-reflection may ease the long-term workload. After weighing the initial

implementation challenges with the long-term benefits, portfolio grading scores a 2 for burden on educators.

Equity: 2

In principle, portfolio grading should produce the same equitable outcomes as CBG as they both allow multiple opportunities for student growth and provide additional academic support. In practice, it is more difficult to validate this theory as a major limitation to the research on portfolio grading is its general lack of measured outcomes for student equity. One study found narrowing equity gaps between black and white students who switched from traditional evaluations to portfolios. However, it also found no impact on a socioeconomic level and a widening gender gap as boys performed significantly worse (Supovitz & Brennan, 1997). Chang (2008) found that the effectiveness of portfolios could vary based on student motivation levels, with less motivated students deriving greater perceived benefits. It may be true that, on average, less motivated students are the ones who entered the classroom with fewer previous academic resources and support. These results could be promising for increasing educational equity, but the overall evidence for this is lacking. This policy has a neutral score of 2.

Transcript Compatibility: 1

Portfolio grading policies face the same clarity issues on students' transcripts as CBG because they also evaluate students with mastery-based labels on a pass/fail or credit/no credit system. Portfolios also score low on transcript compatibility with a score of 1.

Mission Alignment: 2

There is mixed evidence on how portfolio grades accomplish Community's mission for its students. Maruszczak (2008) found that portfolio grading fosters critical thinking through autonomous decision-making, and increased introspection. The inclusion of formative reflections within portfolio systems allows students to become active learners by regularly reevaluating their learning progress. Chang (2008) also found that portfolio systems have shown potential to enhance students' responsibility, critical-thinking, self-perception, and engagement. Additionally, Johnson (2022) found that when teachers clearly communicate the grading process, portfolios can boost student self-efficacy, which supports students' active learning and empowerment. However, contrasting evidence from Nowacki (2013) in a medical school setting shows that portfolio grading may lead to lower feelings of personal achievement, suggesting that it might not consistently foster open-mindedness or active learning. The strength of all of these claims varies, due to major limitations stemming from relatively small sample sizes and limited experimental data. Due to this ambiguity, this policy receives a 2 for mission alignment.

Alternative Four: Contract Grading

Grade Accuracy: 2

Studies indicate that contract grading produces final grades that closely mirror student mastery. Contract grades only evaluate students based on the provisions in their contract so students, parents, and teachers always know exactly how a student is evaluated. Students reported that clearer evaluative metrics led to a greater preference to contract over traditional grading (Bonner, 2016; Litterio, 2018; Potts, 2010). Potts (2010) also found that for the 16% of students who would have been awarded different grades under a traditional system, their grades only differed by less than half a letter grade. Though there is limited research on how students evaluated under contracts perform on standardized tests, Kuhn (2020) found that their grades could accurately predict their concurrent GPAs.

While there is a lapse in the available literature on links between contract grading and instances of cheating, there is robust evidence on its impact on intrinsic motivation. By requiring students to revise their work until it meets clearly defined standards, the system encourages deeper engagement with the learning process and reduces the incentive to cheat. Contract grading creates an environment where students succeed based on their own merits, which boosts students' confidence and engagement (Barlow, 1975; Inoue, 2004; Kuhn, 2020; Strong et al., 2004Villanueva, 2014; Zarzeski, 1998). However, the lack of direct evidence on cheating and standardized test outcomes also gives contract grading scores a 2 for grade accuracy.

Burden on Educators: 2

Contract grading can initially increase the administrative and instructional burden on educators due to the need for individualized contract negotiation, ongoing assessment revisions, and detailed feedback. Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) indicate that teacher's initial adoption of contract negotiation increased workload, but it decreased over time as teachers' experience increased. The process requires educators to design clear contract options, dedicate class time to team-building and contract negotiations, and track students' progress against their personalized agreements (Kuhn, 2020). This heightened workload is compounded by the need to manage potential issues from students with inaccurate assessments of their own learning while ensuring that all contracts meet consistent standards.

Despite these challenges, it's possible to mitigate this burden through initial efforts to create robust tracking systems and adding time to class for negotiation (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001). Potts (2010) also noted that while the administrative workload is higher in the beginning of the semester, educators may experience reduced stress if the process is streamlined with experience and clear guidelines. Students with previous experience with contract grading are less likely to need additional support from their instructor and their peers become more self-directed as the semester progresses (Barlow, 1974; Lindemann & Harbke 2011; Potts, 2010). Therefore, it's likely that teachers' workloads in the fall and subsequent semesters will decrease and even become more "pleasurable" (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001). Similar to portfolios, contract grading scores a 2 for burden on educators, after balancing the initial implementation challenges with these long-term benefits.

Equity: 3

This alternative offers strong equity benefits by leveling the playing field for historically marginalized students. Kuhn (2020) conducted a large study of community college composition courses to demonstrate that Latinx, Black, and Middle Eastern students in contract-graded courses had the same retention and success rates as white students. These results indicate that contracts can help reduce traditional racial academic equity gaps. In addition, La Rose (2024) showed that contract grading in a social work leadership program enabled numerous accessibility accommodations due to the flexible nature of contracts.

Furthermore, contract grading's emphasis on clear expectations and the opportunity for revision can reduce students' fear of failure and boost intrinsic motivation among students who may otherwise be disadvantaged by high-stakes assessment practices. The increased one-on-one time noted by Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) also helps address individuals' learning needs. However, it is important to note that high-performing students, who are typically white, wealthier, and without disabilities, are less likely to prefer contract grading (Cowan, 2020; Hiller & Hietapelto 2001; Inoue, 2012; Yarber, 1974). One student stated that they "would rather fulfill [their professor's] expectations than have the opportunity to set my own" (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001). However, while some students found the process stressful, 94% still preferred it to traditional grading systems and 96% stated that they would recommend it to other classes (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001). These conclusions support contract grading's score of 3.

Transcript Compatibility: 3

One of the biggest advantages to contract grading is that it can be readily translated into traditional transcript formats. By aligning individualized contracts with predetermined mastery criteria, contract grading provides a transparent and accountable method for evaluating student performance. The final grades can still be assigned on an A–F scale but are determined by a process that emphasizes learning and improvement. Contract grading ensures that students' achievements are communicated effectively in official records, making this alternative highly compatible with traditional transcripts with a score of 3.

Mission Alignment: 3

Contract grading accomplishes all aspects of Community's mission. Research by Lejuene (2010) indicates that combining mastery learning with contract grading not only improved students' learning outcomes, but also enhanced their sense of control over the learning process. This fosters an environment that promotes both empowerment and critical thinking. Similarly, Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) found that contract grading also encourages skills such as negotiation, evaluation, and self-reflection, all of which are crucial for developing critical thinkers and active learners. Lindemann & Harbke (2011) found that these values were reflected in practice as students under contract grades were 33% less likely to fail or withdraw from a course.

However, while contract grading increases autonomy and intrinsic motivation for many students, it can also invoke anxiety among high-performing students who are resistant to non-traditional evaluation methods (Cowan, 2020; Hiller & Hietapelto 2001; Inoue, 2012; Yarber, 1974). Despite this apprehension, the fact that so many students continue to recommend it to other courses indicates that contract grades do produce open-minded students. Therefore, I give contract grading a score of 3 on mission alignment.

Outcomes Matrix

	Grade Accuracy	Burden on Educators	Equity	Transcript Compatibility	Mission Alignment	Average Score
Status Quo-Traditional Grading	1	3	1	3	1	1.8
Competency-Based Grading	3	1	3	1	3	2.2
Portfolio Grading	2	2	2	1	2	1.8
Contract Grading	**2**	**2**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**2.6**

Policy Recommendation:

I recommend that Community Lab School adopt a contract grading policy for its high school. One of the primary benefits of Community's current traditional grading system is its familiarity and ease of use. While this system is well-understood by students, families, teachers, and college admissions officers, Community would have to continue to wrestle with its inequitable outcomes and inaccuracies in measuring learning. In comparison to other grading models, contract grading would provide the most benefits to Community. Contract grading closely aligns with the school's mission with a score of 3. This grading model emphasizes student empowerment and promotes critical thinking by providing students with more control over their learning. This merit deeply resonates with the school's progressive educational goals.

While there are general causal limitations to the literature, contract grading's simplicity and adaptability to the current education system make it a low-risk choice. Its strengths lie in its ability to conform to traditional transcript structures without exacerbating academic inequities. Contract grading's high scores on both of these criteria reflect its ability to level the playing field for historically marginalized students while still producing grades that align with traditional, easily understood A–F letter grades. These criteria provide contract grading its greatest advantage over CBG, which may more accurately capture students' mastery, but struggles with transcript conversion. Although there are important tradeoffs, the benefits of fostering an open, mastery-oriented learning environment that produces transcripts that reflect both student effort and achievement far outweigh these challenges. Following this analysis, I must conclude that contract grading stands out as the most balanced and mission-consistent alternative and positions Community as a local leader in innovative educational practices.

Implementation:

There are two primary challenges to a successful transition to contract grading at Community: developing a shared understanding of grading purpose and ensuring teacher and administrative support. The transition requires collective clarity in the purpose of grading, and structured implementation strategies to ensure long-term success. Faculty, students, parents, and administrators will also play critical roles in adapting to this shift, though their perspectives may vary. The implementation process will unfold in four structured phases, from stakeholder engagement in spring 2025 to a final faculty vote in summer 2026. Clear communication, professional development, and administrative planning will be essential to mitigating challenges and ensuring a smooth transition.

Phase One: Stakeholder Engagement

During the remainder of this spring semester, Community should inform stakeholders of coming changes and gather more faculty and student input about grading policy preferences. This stage includes at least two meetings with the entire faculty and administration. The first meeting should provide teachers with a comprehensive education of what contract grading is and how it could benefit Community's classes. The second meeting would explain the process for adopting contract grading for the next school year and to receive input from teachers on additional best practices. Including teachers in the decision-making process is crucial because it increases the likelihood of long-term policy success (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Finally, Community should hold an open meeting to inform students and parents and guardians of the upcoming changes before the end of the school year.

Phase Two: Teacher Training & Course Redesign

The bulk of the work for restructuring grading methods would take place over this summer. Community should use the pre-existing professional development days to have the teaching teams finalize changes in class structure to ensure consistency across

subjects and grade levels. Teachers should also use this time to draft potential grading contracts and decide whether or not their classes should use individual or whole-class contracts.

Phase Three: Implementation & Refinement

At the beginning of the year, teachers should inform their students in detail about the grading policy changes and begin the contract negotiation process. In addition to teaching teams' regular meetings, there should be monthly whole staff meetings to measure progress and gauge the success of the reform based on the quality of student assessments compared to previous years. After the fall semester, teachers should gather student feedback on their experiences to determine if modifications to contracts need to occur in the spring semester.

This phase has the biggest potential for resistance from stakeholders. Faculty and administrators at Community will be at the forefront of the implementation process, as they would be responsible for restructuring assessment strategies, integrating new grading contracts into coursework, and maintaining grading consistency across subjects. Given Community's commitment to student-centered learning, many educators may support contract grading as a means to promote mastery and self-directed learning. However, some of the biggest obstacles to implementation are teacher resistance and insufficient administrator support (Everson, 2023; Guskey, 2011; Guskey, 2020; Strong et al., 2004). Although faculty and administrators all want to help their students, some teachers might resist changes if contract grading significantly increases their initial workload at the beginning of the school year. Administrators would need to provide additional initial support to educators to ensure their buy-in to the policy change. While faculty and administrators who value innovative education practices may be receptive to contract grading, success will depend on balancing teacher workload with administrative support and clear policy standardization.

Another major source of stakeholder resistance might come from students and parents. A core part of Community's mission is to produce empowered students, making their buy-in crucial to the success of contract grading. Typically, previously high-achieving students are more resistant to grading reform, but this might not be the case for Community's students who had prior experience with alternative grading systems in their middle school (Everson, 2023; Hiller & Hietapelto 2001; Yarber, 1974). Concerns from parents and guardians usually stems from genuine concern for their children, particularly in the college admissions process (Franklin et al., 2016; Hartocollis, 2016). It is possible that there will be less resistance from Community parents who already chose to enroll their children in a more innovative school. To address parents' potential apprehension, the administration should offer additional informational sessions and provide clear grading conversion charts in the fall. This process will help ease concerns and build broader acceptance among students and families.

Phase Four: Review & Evaluation

At the end of the spring semester, there should be two additional faculty wide meetings. At the first meeting, teachers should have an opportunity to present their

experiences with contract grading and review whether or not this policy change truly resulted in more accurate, equitable grades. During the second meeting, all Community teachers and administrators should vote whether or not to continue contract grading into the next school year. The school would need at least 75% of the vote to continue the policy. This step is crucial to measuring the success of the grading reform, as widespread changes require high continuous support from teachers. Taking a faculty vote also reflects Community's high valuation of the insights of its teachers, as well as its commitment to evidence-based practices.

Implementation Challenges and Strategic Responses

The first challenge is to form a collective understanding of the purpose of a grade. This step is critical to the long-term success and sustainability of any grading reform (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2011; Guskey, 2020; Guskey 2021). Everson (2023) found that long-term policy sustainability and success depended on gaining teachers' initial buy-in to the reform as it created more consistency across grades and subjects. Brookhart (2011) and Guskey (2021) emphasize that grading can serve different functions, from measuring mastery to motivating students, but inconsistency in these perceptions can create resistance. CLS must clarify that contract grading prioritizes learning over compliance, reinforcing the shift through professional development and student orientation sessions.

The second major challenge for Community is to establish consistent teacher and administrator support to further ensure sustainability. Teachers often resist grading reforms if they lack strong professional development, and Hiller & Hietapelto (2001) highlight that contract grading increases teachers' workload (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Without proper administrative planning, contract grading can lead to inconsistencies in implementation, frustration among educators, and inequitable grading practices (Barlow, 1974; Everson, 2023). For example, it would create unnecessary confusion for students in PBL courses if they were evaluated under radically different contracts in every class for the same project. However, the grading policy's compatibility with traditional transcripts allows it to work within a framework familiar to students (Potts, 2010). To mitigate all of these risks, Community must begin with a communal understanding of the purpose of grading while administrators provide continuous support to ensure successful implementation.

Conclusion:

One of the primary benefits of Community Lab School's current grading system is its familiarity and ease of use. The traditional grading system is well-understood by students, families, and teachers. This familiarity provides a clear, standardized metric that colleges and universities are accustomed to using for admissions, eliminating potential stress over competitive colleges applications. The predictability of this system is also important for parents and families who are familiar with its structure and its associated expectations. While this system may not be the most accurate reflection of student learning, its simplicity and widespread understanding make it a low-risk choice.

However, Community would need to continue to wrestle with the limitations of traditional grading methods and its inequitable outcomes and inaccuracies in measuring learning.

After an analysis of three other alternative grading models, contract grading would provide the most benefits to Community relative to traditional grading. Although it is difficult to reform a model that has become the norm within American schools for almost a century, contract grading provides an alternative that works within the current model but offers far greater alignment with Community's values. If Community is able to demonstrate that successful grading reform is possible, then the school could become a catalyst for broader change within the Albemarle County Public School system. A free education is one of the most important public goods available to young people in the United States. It has the power to shape students' lives long after the final bell rings. For too long, grades have at best inhibited student learning and at worst perpetuated systemic inequalities for the sake of convenience. By implementing contract grading, Community can serve as a model for how schools can successfully fulfill their responsibility with high-quality, equitable, and evidence-based education.

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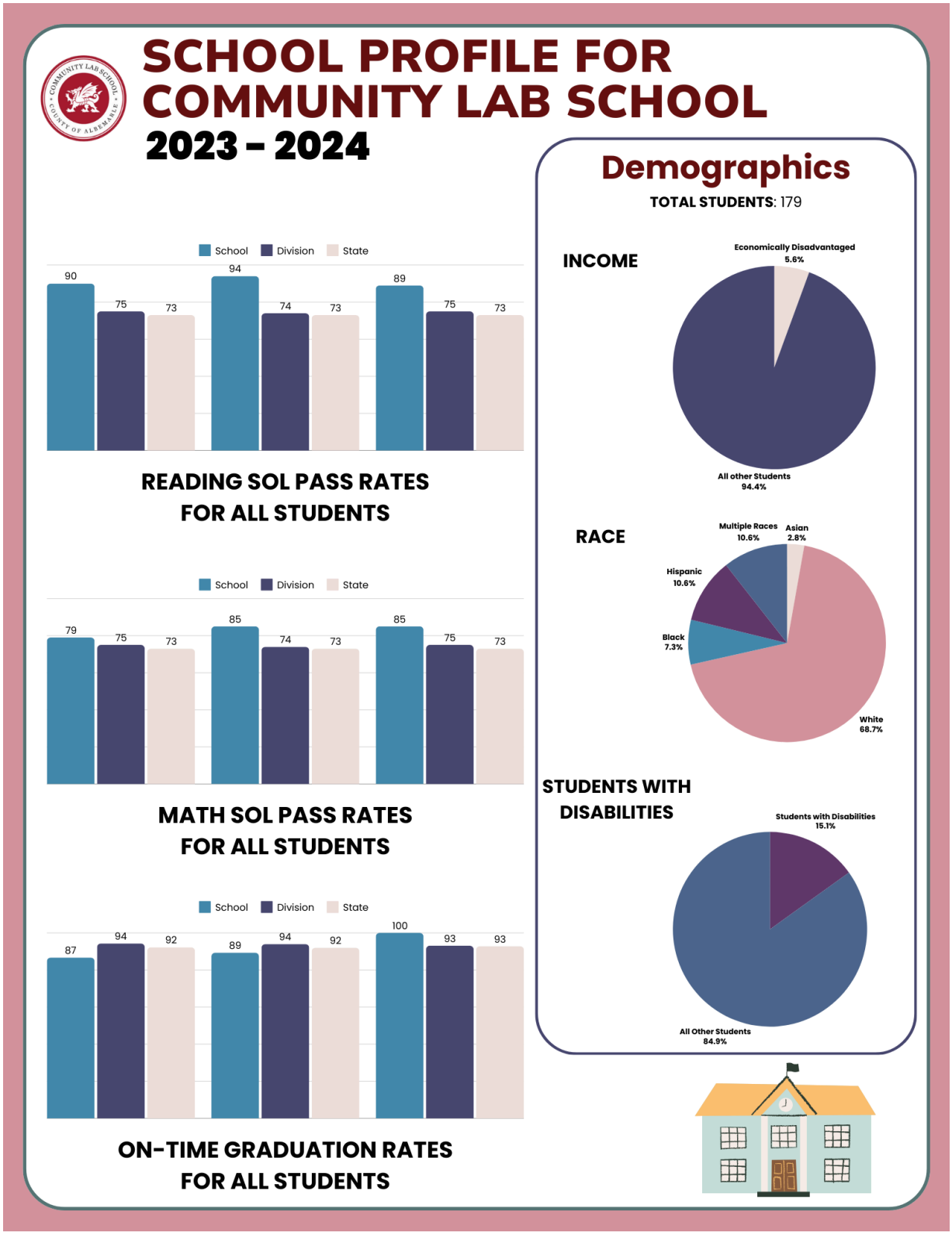
Appendix A: Community Lab's School Quality Profile



Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2025

Appendix B: Limitations of Existing Literature:

Evidence on Equitable Outcomes:

Further study is needed on the impacts of alternative grading methods on educational equity. Although the disparities of the traditional grading systems are well-documented, the equity implications of CBG, portfolio, and contract grading rely on smaller studies with less reliable external validity. In particular, the existing literature on portfolio grading focuses largely on impacts on test scores, and general student self-efficacy and reflection rather than how these outcomes differ across student demographic groups. Equitable outcomes for different student groups are crucial to the evaluation of any grading policy because anything less would go directly against Community's mission. Although the student population at Community is less diverse than Albemarle County broadly, the potential for long-term application into the rest of ACPS makes it imperative that any grading policy centers education equity.

Causal Evidence from High Schools:

While more school systems in the U.S. and Canada have begun to investigate implementing new grading practices, there is still a general lack of experimental research on the effectiveness of current alternative grading systems in schools. While there are numerous published studies on alternative grading systems, the field requires more causal evidence. Many of the studies highlighted in this memo draw from school-wide initiatives, which can create a critical issue for their generalizability for a smaller school like Community. Additionally, there are far more experimental studies focusing on higher education and medical schools compared to secondary schools. This presents two primary issues in that (1) these classes typically have smaller sample sizes and; (2) the nature of the material and students' cognitive ability establish an environment notably different than Community. The current literature also lacks causal data and conclusions about how alternative grading methods may align with PBL or IB programs. In order to make more clear decisions about which grading practices are best for high school students, we need to have more evidence from casual studies that are generalizable to Community or ACPS.

Appendix C: Implementation Timeline