Academic Categories Grading: Parents' FAQ

You may have noticed that your student's teachers will be using a grading system different than those with which you may be more familiar. This FAQ is designed to help understand some key aspects of the system so that you as a parent are an informed participant in the effective school-home partnerships that we wish to build.

1) What is this grading system all about?

This approach is called *Academic Categories Grading*. This means that students are assessed and graded on categories of what they're being asked to learn (like *reading*, *writing*, or *math application*), not the kind of test they're taking (like *test*, *quiz*, or *homework*). It's based in part of standards-based grading, but with some differences.

This system is based on the idea that a single grade for a student does not provide enough information about a student's performance. Academic Categories Grading shows students and parents a more complete picture of how a student performs in the key areas of a given course.

2) Do students still receive grades?

Yes. Students receive a grade just as they always have—the difference is that students, parents, and teachers can see what key elements of performance make up that grade.

3) What are these "categories" and how are they different?

Most teachers use categories like *tests*, *quizzes*, and *homework*. The Academic Categories System instead has teachers ask, "*What do students really need to know and learn to do*," and list their categories accordingly. For example, an English/Language Arts class might have the categories:

- reading   - speaking/listening   - 21st century skills
- writing   - language

That means that in this class, every assessment a student is given will be evaluated on one or more of these categories. An assessment on vocabulary might be one part language and one part writing. An assessment after reading a novel might be part reading, part writing, and part 21st century skills like critical thinking.

A science class might feature the following categories:
- science content   - acquiring scientific knowledge and thinking
- 21st century skills   - applying scientific knowledge and thinking

A project-based lesson in this science classroom might involve assessments of a students knowledge of *science content* (facts about science), ability to *acquire* and *apply science* (reading new information and/or applying what you know to a science situation), and *21st century skills*.

4) What are "21st century skills"?

These skills have been defined in numerous ways. Our schools follow the framework of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), a leader in this area of research. P21 defines these skills as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication with 21st century media (i.e., online technology). The importance of these skills as a part of college and career readiness means that they must be included in the curricula of different subjects and be explicitly taught and assessed for mastery. Students will be expected to practice, master, and demonstrate these skills in the course of studying disciplines like English, math, science, social studies, world language, the arts, and more. See the P21 website for a more-detailed explanation: http://www.p21.org/. We are also interested in cultivating a skill called "grit" in our students; students may be assessed in this area in the future. See this website for more info: https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/duckworth. Together, these and other related skills are often called "non-cognitive skills"

5) I need a visual for all of this... it's hard to understand without a picture.

This picture represents what you might see as a summary of a particular student:

Reporting Term: S1		Teacher Name: Marc Mancinelli		
Category	Points Earned	Points Possible	Percentage	Weight
Reading Information	7790	9870	78.9%	0.15
Reading Literature	7790	9870	78.9%	0.15
Writing	7426	8635	86.0%	0.3
Speaking and Listening	5198	5650	92.0%	0.2
21C Skills	3617	4110	88.0%	0.2
Totals	31820	38135	83.4%	1
Whole Grade				85%

6) Does this mean that some assessments will have more than one grade?

Yes—sometimes. What we teach and ask students to learn is complex, as it should be for a complex world. It's important, therefore, that our assessments capture that complexity. A writing assignment will assess writing, of course, but it's also likely assessing how much content knowledge a student may have learned, how well he or she has read, and how much critical thinking is being shown, for instance. Assessments and grading systems need to capture that information accurately so that teachers can see how students are—or aren't—learning what's important for each course.

7) How will this affect my student's grades?

The intent of this system is that by having a more complete picture of a student's performance, teachers will be able to intervene in a more individual way for each student. This system will help teachers know if a student is having trouble in reading, but shows excellence in speaking and listening—or vice versa. The more teachers know about where students excel and where they struggle, the more effective their help will be, and the more students' grades will rise!

8) Will my students' grades go down?

There's nothing in the system that will, on its own, cause students' grades to drop. Teachers experienced with this system have not reported significant drops in grades. Some teachers who have used this system have run two gradebooks at the same time—a traditional system and Academic Categories Grading—to see if grades would drop. We're happy to say that this did not happen at all.

9) Where is this system used?

At present, there are 5 districts that are in various stages of full-use or piloting this system. Another 10 districts or so are in the "learning" stage in which teachers and administrators are generating interest in their staff and planning to begin use in the near future.

10)   Whom can I contact with more questions or for more details?

Feel free to contact your school's principal or Dr. Marc Mancinelli, Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Lindenwold Public Schools: mmancinelli@lindenwold.k12.nj.us