



# Can Competency Based Grading Work at the Middle School Level?

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

Data, Research, and Accountability (DRA) Department  
WCPSS Student Achievement Committee  
June 27, 2022

# Takeaways

## Major Findings:

- Student and teacher satisfaction with the grading system improved during the duration of the pilot
- Parents remained unsure of how to interpret competency-based grades
- Carroll graduates did just as well as other students in high school based on
  - HS course grades
  - grade 9 retention rates

## Recommendations:

- Maintain implementation at Carroll MS
- Additional support to parents to build understanding of the standards and how to support their children's learning
- Address parent concerns about the interpretability of grades
- Continue to support teachers in their competency-based grading efforts
- Expand but consider starting with a single entry grade level (i.e., 6th grade)

# Background

Competency-based grading was adopted by Carroll Middle School in 2018-19 due to:

- lower-than-expected standardized test results in core subject areas,
- varied teacher expectations in grading, and
- lack of student ownership over their learning.

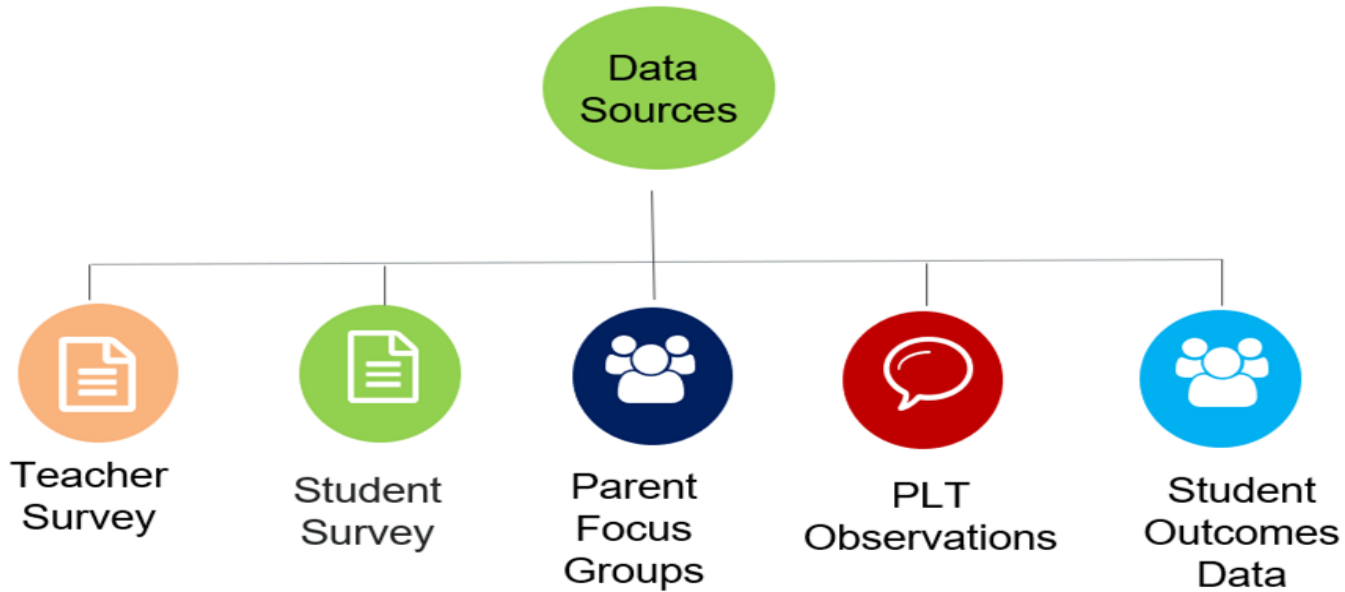
## Competency-Based Grading

Student learning is measured by mastery of multiple specific elements of the NC Standard Course of Study

# The Plan




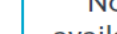



STRATEGIES	IMPLEMENTATION	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
<p>Instruction and assessment focused on standards</p> <p>Student-led parent conferences</p> <p>Competency-based grading</p>	<p>Teachers use instructional units reflecting standards and assessment data to personalize instruction</p> <p>Use of digital portfolios</p> <p>Students participate in student-led conferences</p> <p>Parents receive standards-based report cards</p>	<p>Students report that their grades do a good job of measuring what they are able to do</p> <p>Teachers and parents report that grades do a good job of measuring student progress</p> <p>Students feel ownership over their learning</p>	<p>Stakeholders report grades do a good job of measuring student progress</p> <p>Increased alignment between grades and EOGs</p> <p>Increase in reading and math proficiency</p> <p>Reduced achievement gaps</p> <p>Carroll graduates perform better in high school than other middle school graduates*.</p>

\*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.



# Implementation Goals

Two of four implementation goals were met in 2020-21. Only two implementation goals were measured in 2019-20

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			

Not Met



Fully Met

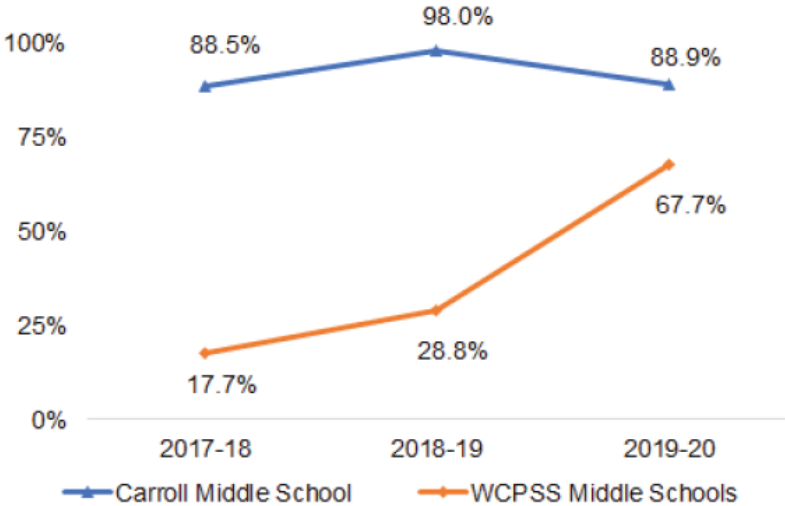
# Standards-Aligned Instructional Units

PLT discussions addressed various components of teaching & 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.
- explicitly reviewing the standards and what students had mastered to ensure instructional units reflected the standards and to determine which standards still needed to be taught and assessed (at least 71% of PLT meetings).
- reviewing of student data to identify areas of mastery and any need to develop competency (about 40% of the observed PLTs).

# Digital Portfolios to Strengthen Ownership

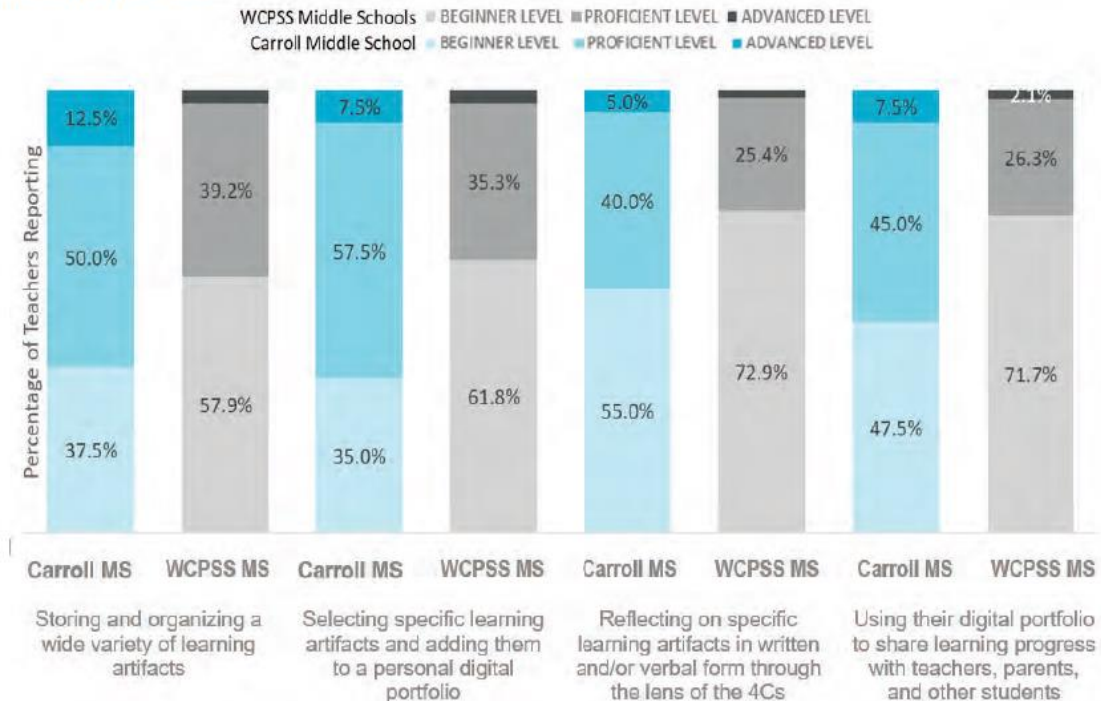
2017-18 to 2019-20 teacher survey results showed higher digital portfolio use at Carroll Middle than at other middle schools



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

# Digital Portfolio Proficiency

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



# Short-term Goals

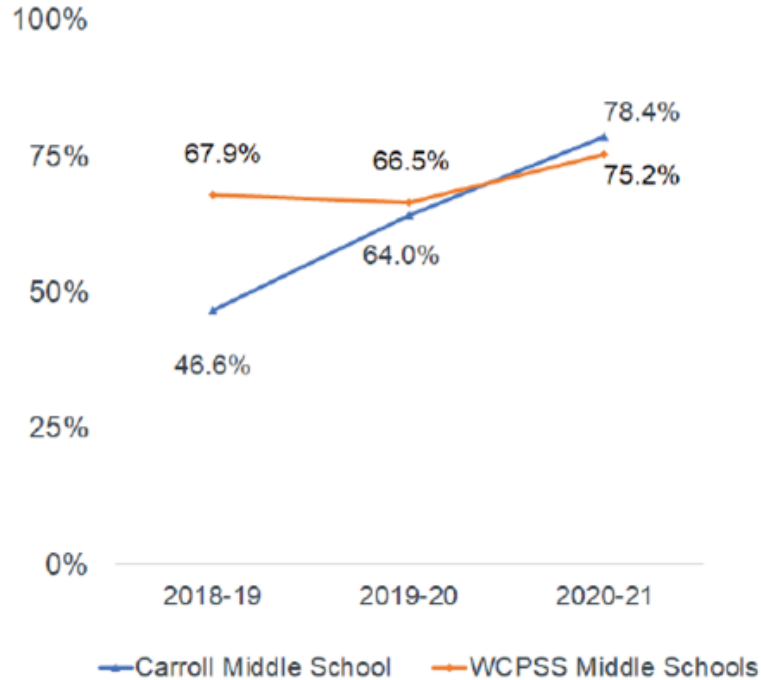
Short-term goals that reflected improved student perceptions were met. Parent data showed little improvement while teacher perceptions data showed initial improvement

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	■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■	■ ■ ■



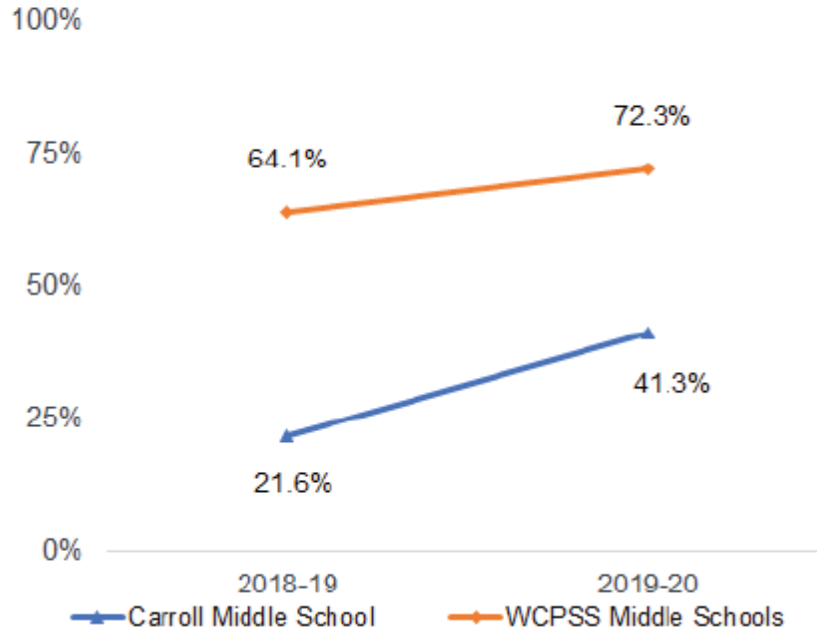
# Students' Perception of Grades

Students reported that their grades do a good job of measuring what they are able to do (2018-19 to 2020-21)



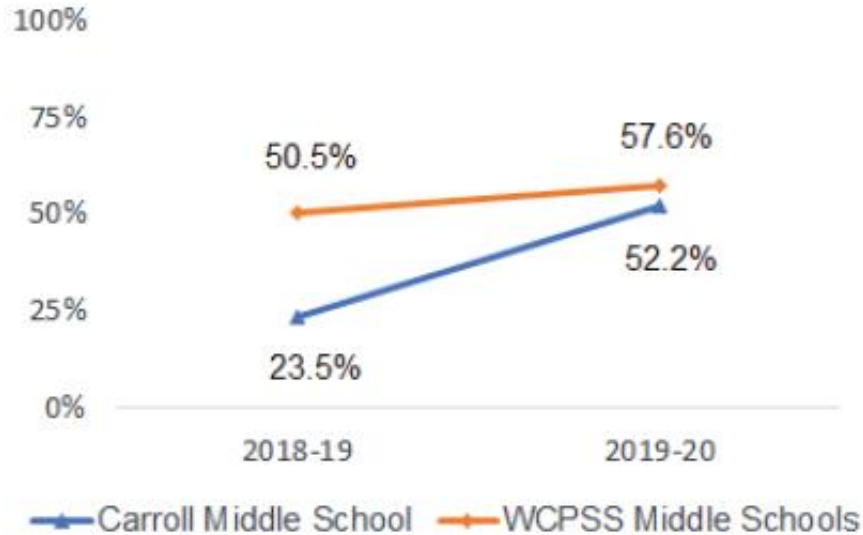
# Teachers' Satisfaction with Grading

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



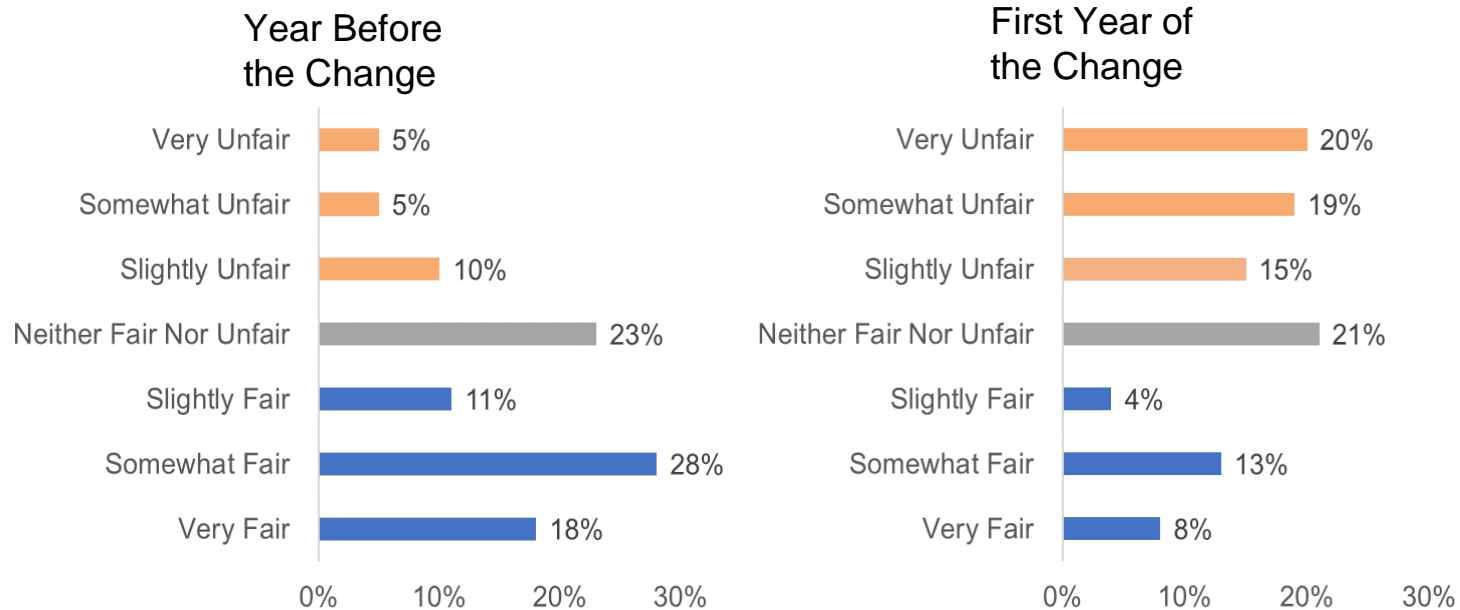
# Teachers' Perception of Report Cards

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



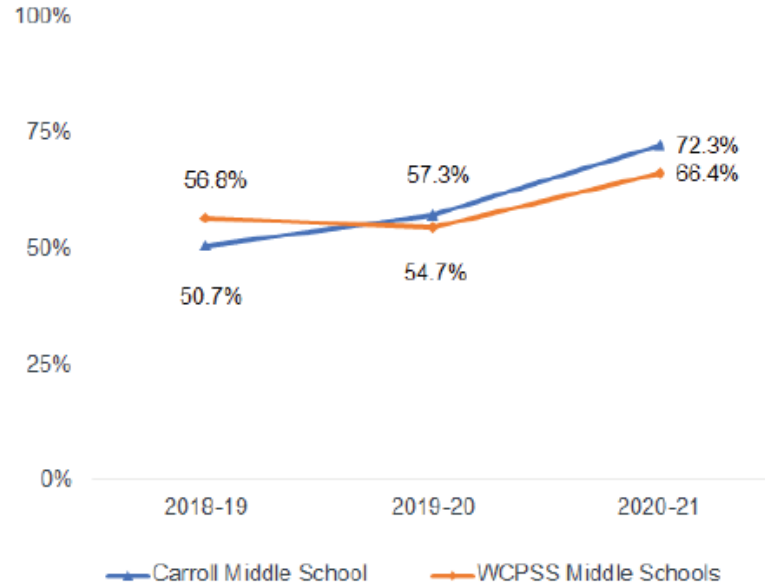
# Parents' Perception of Grades

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



# Students' Ownership of their Learning

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

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	



# Parents' Perceptions of Grades



*"Explanation [of the grading system] is not sufficient."*

*"It feels like a vague measuring tool."  
(2 parents)*

*"I do not have a great understanding of the grading system."  
(2 parents)*



*"I had to engage individual teachers to get understanding."  
(2 parents)*

*"It depends on the teacher and their understanding of how competencies align."  
(4 parents).*

*"In high school there will not be a practice semester to figure out what grading is and adjust to GPA accordingly."*



*"It is really hard to get out of the ABC mindset for parents and students. But it is really helpful to see the standards set out. I really appreciate teacher feedback in Empower."*



*"I had an experience opposite to most. My children use [their grades] to get an understanding of where they need to support themselves and what standard they do not understand, so they know what they need to do."*

*"[It seems that] children who went to Sanderson are doing great."*

# Parents' Perceptions of Digital Portfolios



"We did not use. The impression was that it was optional, only needed for parent-teacher conferences."  
(4 parents)

"I do not see how digital portfolios relate to the child's control of learning."

"Neither of my children ever used it."



"I heard about it in 6 grade, but no one has ever mentioned it since."

"It feels more like a tool for tracking vs something that helps them to be in control of their learning. They are pulling assignments of work from classes. This is more of a documentation tool."



"I like the concept which is also communicated well. It almost reminds me of a work environment where you may have your own portfolio. In that sense it is great. They are isolated assignments pulled together. There is an opportunity to leverage that even further to see learning happening and articulate growth."

"I have seen it only in student-led conferences."



"The oldest used the digital portfolio to keep track of his work and shared with me at parent-teacher conferences. It was helpful. The 7 grader did not use it."

"My child shares her digital portfolio regularly to show work."

# Parents' Perceptions of Report Cards



"I don't recall seeing a report card from last year. So, I went to school and picked a copy of it up. It makes no sense to me. If a score says 2.5 is that out of a 2.5 or 3 or what?"



"The narrative section, while always positive often provides very "canned" answers and thus has very minimal usefulness."

"I don't feel it provides many details and not much teacher feedback."

"Not detailed enough."



"I feel like the report cards we do get depend on how much time the teacher puts into it personalizing it for my child."

"Depends on the teacher."

I had good experience mostly. It would be helpful to have a more detailed section, not just a one-page report card, which would explain where a number (say, 2.5) comes from."

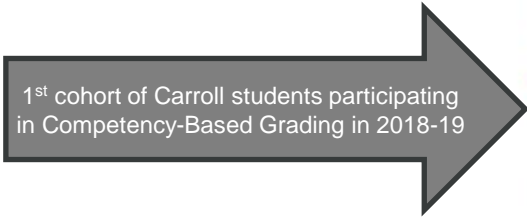


"Very satisfied with grades, given we were/are tracking regularly, thus leaving no room for surprises."

"I like the comments section from teachers. It is more helpful than the grade itself."

# Academic Long-Term Goals

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



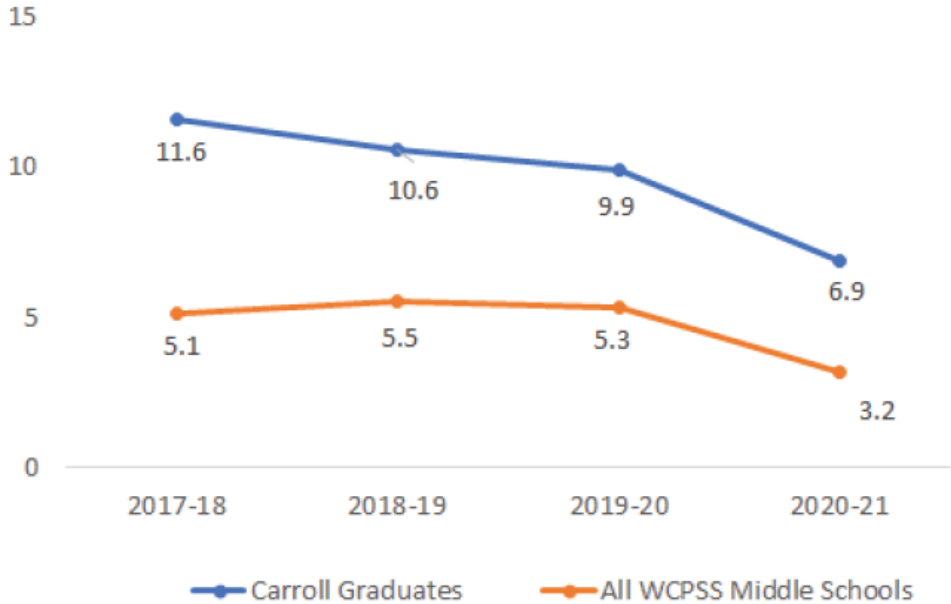
1<sup>st</sup> cohort of Carroll students participating in Competency-Based Grading in 2018-19

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

*9<sup>th</sup> grade 1<sup>st</sup> quarter grades also showed no difference in performance between Carroll graduates and other Sanderson students.*

# Academic Long-Term Goals

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



# Takeaways

## Major Findings:

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  - HS course grades
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