

# BC's Descriptive Grading on Report Cards Has Parents Yearning for the ABCs

Paige MacPherson



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## Executive Summary

- New survey shows Canadian parents with kids in K-12 schools, and parents in British Columbia, find letter grades on report cards significantly clearer and easier to understand than the BC government’s new descriptive grading terms.
- In 2023, the BC government switched report cards in Kindergarten to Grade 9 from letter grades—such as A, B, C, and D—to the descriptive terms “emerging,” “developing,” “proficient,” and “extending.”
- 98% of Canadian parents say regular, clear assessment of student performance is important to them.
- When asked if switching from letter grades or percentage grades to descriptive grading would make their child’s academic progress clearer and easier to understand, Canadian parents are divided almost evenly. Yet in practice, Canadian parents find letter grades easier to understand.
- 93% of Canadian parents say the letter grade “A” is clear and easy to understand and 68% could correctly identify what “A” means.
- 83% of Canadian parents say the letter grade “C” is clear and easy to understand, and 75% could correctly identify what “C” means.
- 58% of Canadian parents found the descriptive grade “Extending” unclear and difficult to understand, and only 26% could correctly identify what “Extending” means. When asked to identify which description matches the term “Extending,” the largest share of parents (40%) responded “don’t know/unsure.”
- 57% of Canadian parents found the descriptive grade “Emerging” unclear and difficult to understand, and only 28% could correctly identify what “Emerging” means. When asked to identify which description matches the term “Emerging,” the largest share of parents (31%) responded “don’t know/unsure.”



## Introduction

In September of 2023, the British Columbia government changed the way that report cards in Kindergarten through Grade 9 communicated student performance to parents, switching from letter grades—such as A, B, C, D, etc.—to descriptive grading, on what the government deemed a “proficiency scale,” replacing letter grades with the terms “emerging,” “developing,” “proficient,” and “extending.”

Early on, media reports indicated that BC parents and teachers were unhappy with this change (DeRosa, 2023). A *Vancouver Sun* article cited one parent whose child was in a Surrey School District school, where descriptive grading was piloted before being rolled out provincewide. For three years, her 10-year-old daughter’s report cards said she was “emerging,” rather than clearly stating she was failing, and her parents were not clearly informed there was a problem until her third-grade teacher called to tell them she was reading at a Kindergarten level.

The BC Education Ministry’s own survey of 4,500 people showed that 69% were dissatisfied with the proposed shift to descriptive grading, while only 13% were satisfied (DeRosa, 2023). Yet the government proceeded with the change.

Today, descriptive grading on report cards has been implemented across the province from Kindergarten to Grade 9, meaning parents no longer receive letter grades to understand their child’s academic performance and progress until they enter high school.

While this policy has been rolled out in BC, similar reviews of report card grading methods have taken place in Alberta and elsewhere (Ferguson, 2020).

This survey, conducted by Leger for the Fraser Institute, offers an analysis of how parents with kids in K-12 schools across Canada (and in each province or region) feel about descriptive grading replacing letter grades, and probes deeper into two questions: 1) whether parents understand BC’s new descriptive grading terms, and 2) whether parents understand descriptive grading or letter grades more clearly, in terms of how their child is doing academically.

First, the survey asked parents how important regular and clear assessments of their kids in K-12 schools are. The Leger survey indicates that among K-12 parents, regular, clear assessment of student performance is important to 98 percent of parents—nearly all parents across Canada.

Next, the survey dug deeper into how report cards present and communicate this information to parents. When asked if switching from letter grades or percentage grades to descriptive grading would make their child's academic progress clearer and easier to understand, parents are divided almost evenly in Canada. In British Columbia, where elementary report cards have already shifted from letter grades to descriptive grading, parents are less likely to agree that this switch would make their child's academic progress easier to understand, than are parents in most other provinces (except Quebec). In other provinces, this shift is theoretical in nature.

Yet the survey shows that parents with kids in K-12 schools find letter grades significantly clearer and easier to understand than BC's new descriptive grading. More than nine in 10 parents (93%) say that the letter grade "A" is clear and easy to understand and about seven in 10 parents (68%) could correctly identify what the letter grade "A" means. Nearly three in 10 parents (27%) did not select the correct definition for letter grade "A," but they came close, selecting "very good" student performance rather than "excellent" student performance. More than eight in 10 parents (83%) say they find the letter grade "C" clear and easy to understand, and three quarters of parents (75%) could correctly identify what the letter grade "C" means.

By contrast, just under six in 10 parents (58%) found the descriptive grade "Extending" unclear and difficult to understand, and only about one quarter of parents (26%) could correctly identify what the descriptive grade "Extending" means. When asked to identify which description matches the term "Extending," the most popular choice amongst K-12 parents was "don't know/unsure" (40%). This lack of clarity when it comes to descriptive grading is especially true among respondents who are 35 or older, and non-immigrants.

More than half of parents (57%) found the descriptive grade "Emerging" unclear and difficult to understand, and fewer than three in 10 parents (28%) could correctly identify what the descriptive grade "Emerging" means. When asked to identify which description matches the term "Emerging," the most popular choice amongst K-12 parents was "don't know/unsure" (31%).

Even in BC, most parents say the terms "Emerging" and "Extending" are unclear and difficult to understand, in terms of their child's academic performance. BC parents were less likely to say they were unsure of what the terms meant, but their ability to correctly select a definition for these terms was not consistently higher than that of parents in other provinces.



In summary, Canadian parents are split on whether replacing letter or percentage grades with descriptive grading would make their child's academic progress clearer and easier to understand—in theory. However, when asked specifically, parents overwhelmingly find letter grades easier to understand than descriptive grades—even in BC, where letter grades have already been replaced with descriptive grading. Fewer than three in 10 Canadian parents can correctly identify the definitions of these descriptive grading terms, while a strong majority can identify the correct definitions for letter grades.

Based on this survey data, switching from letter grades to descriptive grading makes it less clear and more difficult for parents to understand how their children are doing in school.

## Details on Polling Methodology

The Fraser Institute commissioned a series of polls from Leger (2024) that surveyed parents of school-aged children (ages 5–18) enrolled in public and independent schools. For the first interviews, a total of 1,200 interviews were conducted via Leger's on-line panel. One thousand interviews were conducted with a representative sampling of parents across Canada. An additional 100 interviews were conducted in Alberta and British Columbia while ensuring a representative sampling was maintained across the nation. For the second interviews, a total of 690 interviews were conducted via Leger's on-line panel. The first interviews were conducted from March 25 to April 8, 2024. The second interviews were conducted with the same pool of respondents, from June 27 to July 8, 2024. As a non-probability survey (in this case, a survey drawn from a research panel), a margin of error is technically not to be reported. For comparative purposes, however, the margin of error would be  $\pm 2.8\%$ , 19 times out of 20 for the first interviews and  $\pm 3.7\%$ , 19 times out of 20 for the second interviews. Results were weighted according to age, gender, and region to give a representative sample of the parent population in Canada. The numbers presented in this poll have been rounded to the whole number. However, raw values were used to calculate the sums presented and therefore may not correspond to the manual addition of these numbers.

## Parental Support for Regular, Clear Student Assessment

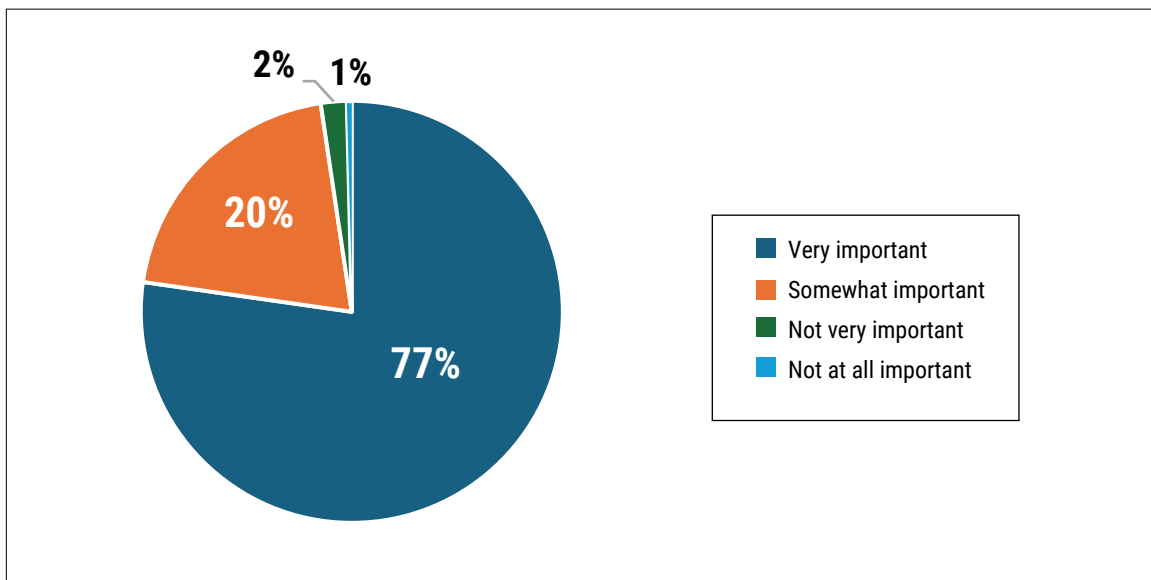
Nearly all Canadian parents—and parents in every province or region—think it is important to receive regular, clear assessments of their children's academic performance.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

*As a parent, how important is it to you to receive regular, clear assessments of your child(ren)'s performance in school?*

Respondents could select one of the following: Very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important, and don't know/unsure.

**Figure 1: Overall Parental Support for Regular, Clear Student Assessments**



As shown in figure 1 above, 98% of Canadian parents said that it is important to receive regular, clear assessments of their child(ren)'s performance in school. A strong majority (77%) of parents with kids in K-12 schools said this is very important to them, and 20% found it somewhat important. Only two percent of parents found it not very important, and zero percent found it not at all important.

## Parental Support for Replacing Letter Grades with Descriptive Grades—In Theory

Canadian parents are divided when asked whether replacing letter or percentage grades with descriptive grading terms would make their child's academic performance clearer and easier for parents to understand.

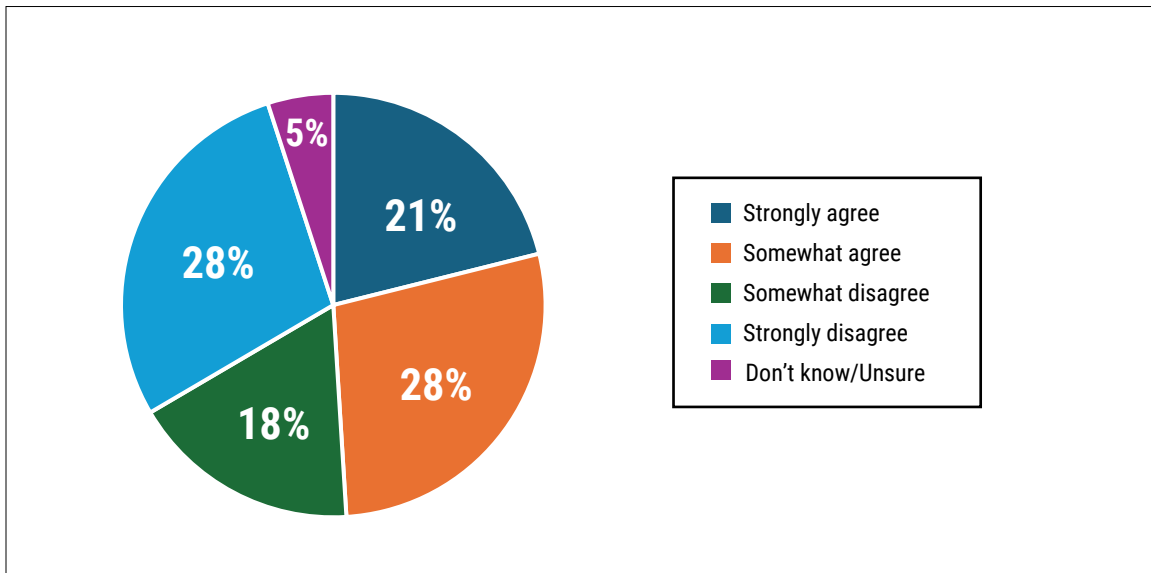
The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

Report cards have typically been marked with letter grades, such as A, B, C, etc. to F or percentage grades (out of 100). The British Columbia government recently changed the report cards in Kindergarten to Grade 9, replacing letter grades with the language “emerging, developing, proficient and extending.” As a parent, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Switching to emerging, developing, proficient, and extending from letter grades (or percentages) for my child's report card makes it clearer and easier to understand my child's academic progress.*

Respondents could select one of the following: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

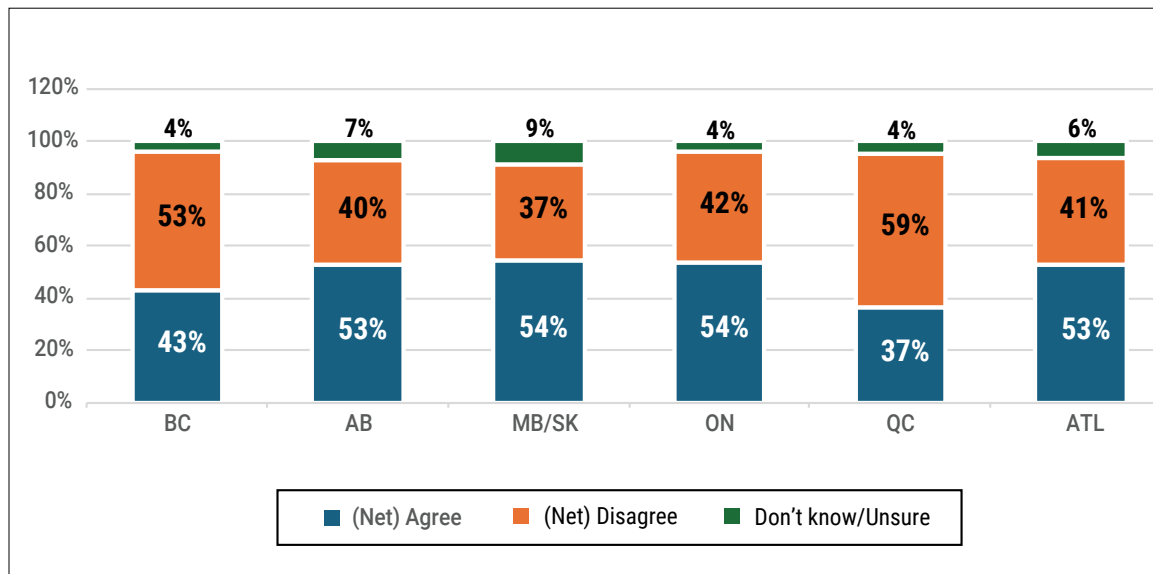
**Figure 2: Overall Parental Support for Replacing Letter Grades with Descriptive Grades**



As shown in figure 2 above, 49% of Canadian parents with kids in K-12 schools agree that switching their child's report card to descriptive grading would make it clearer and easier to understand their child's academic progress, while 46% disagree.

BC replaced letter grades with descriptive grading on K-9 report cards in 2023. When these results are broken down regionally, the majority of BC parents (53%) disagree that switching from letter or percentage grades to descriptive grading will make their child's academic performance clearer and easier to understand, while 43% agree.

**Figure 3: Overall Parental Support, by Province or Region, for Replacing Letter Grades with Descriptive Grades**



As shown in figure 3 above, the majority of BC parents (53%) disagree that switching from letter or percentage grades to descriptive grading will make their child's academic performance clearer and easier to understand, while 43% agree. This disagreement that descriptive grading makes things easier for parents to understand is strongest in Quebec, where 59% of parents disagree and only 37% of parents agree. BC parents show the second-strongest disagreement in Canada.

## Parental Understanding of Descriptive Grades—In Practice

Canadian parents with kids in K-12 schools find letter grades significantly clearer and easier to understand than BC's new descriptive grading. The Leger survey selected two of BC's new descriptive grades—"Extending" and "Emerging" and two letter grades, "A" and "C"—and asked parents first how easy it is for them to identify what each of these grades means.

Second, using the BC Ministry of Education's own definitions, the survey provided parent respondents with a list of descriptions for each term, and asked parents to match the descriptive grade or letter grade with the correct definition, in terms of their child's academic performance, to the best of their ability. The full list of terms and their definitions can be found in the Appendix of this paper. For the definitional questions on descriptive grading, a list of the BC government's definitions for four descriptive grades on the province's "proficiency scale" was used: "emerging," "developing," "proficient," and "extending."<sup>1</sup> For the definitional questions on letter grading, a list of the BC government's definitions for four letter grades—A, B, C, and F—was used.<sup>2</sup>

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

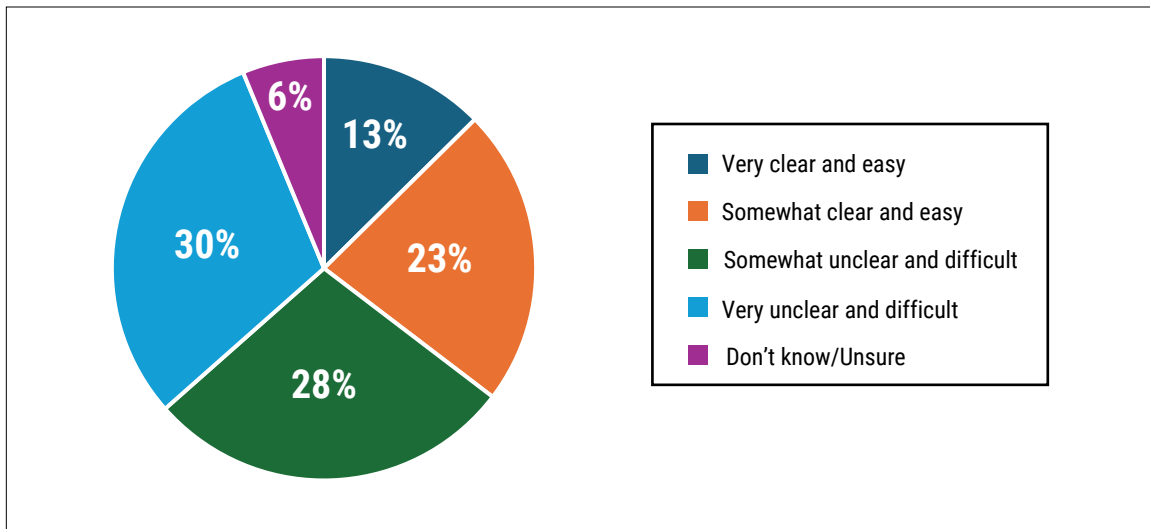
*In terms of your child's academic performance, how easy is it for you to identify what the term "Extending" means?*

Respondents could select one of the following: Very clear and easy, somewhat clear and easy, unclear and difficult, somewhat unclear and difficult, and don't know/unsure.

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1 The language used to define the terms in the proficiency scale (Emerging, Developing, Proficient, and Extending) is drawn from the British Columbia government *Unpacking the Proficiency Scale: Support for Educators* document, "The Provincial Proficiency Scale," p. 2, and the British Columbia government's *K-12 Student Reporting Policy—Communicating Student Learning Guidelines* document, "The Provincial Proficiency Scale," pp. 27–29.

2 The language used to define the letter grades (A, B, C, F) is drawn from the British Columbia government's *K-12 Student Reporting Policy—Communicating Student Learning Guidelines* document, "Letter Grades and Percentages" (Grades 10–12), p. 31.

**Figure 4: Canadian Parents' Understanding of Descriptive Grade "Extending"**

As shown in figure 4 above, just under six in 10 Canadian parents (58%) found the descriptive grade “Extending” unclear and difficult to understand (with 30% saying it is “very difficult and unclear” and 28% saying it is “somewhat difficult and unclear”). As shown, 35% of parents found “Extending” clear and easy to understand, with 13% finding it “very clear and easy to understand” and 23% finding it “somewhat clear and easy to understand.” Another six percent responded “don’t know/unsure.”

The Leger survey then gave parents a list of definitions for descriptive report card terms, and asked them to correctly match the definition with the report card term.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

*To the best of your ability, please indicate which description matches the following report card term: “Extending.” If you do not know, please indicate that.*

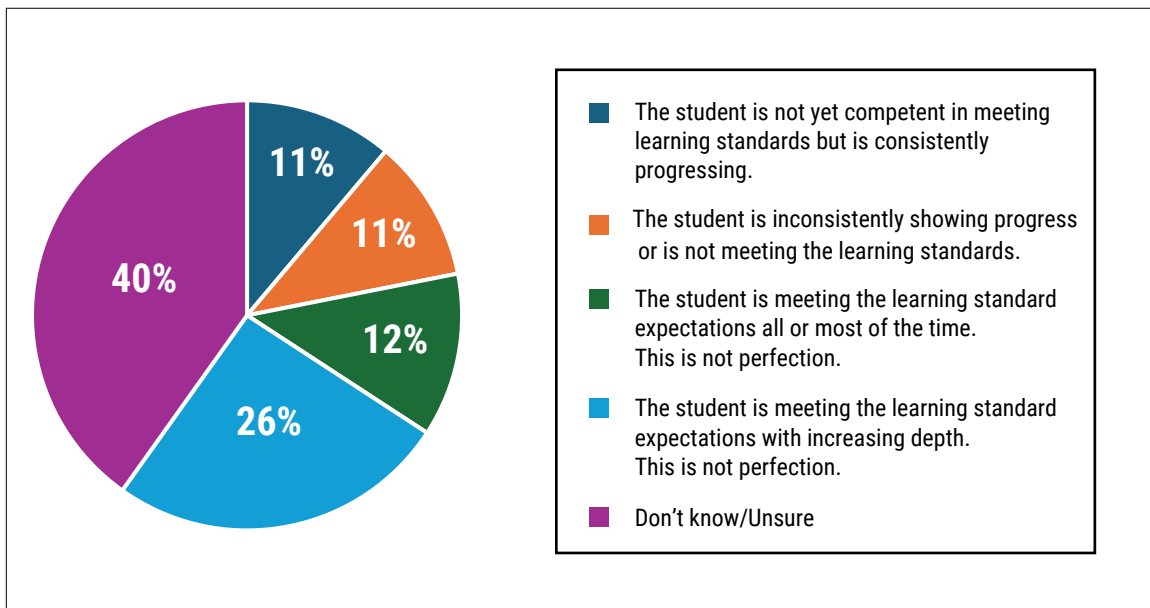
Respondents could select one of the following definitions, based on the BC Ministry of Education’s documents:

- The student is not yet competent in meeting learning standards but is consistently progressing.
- The student is inconsistently showing progress or is not meeting the learning standards.
- The student is meeting the learning standard expectations all or most of the time. This is not perfection.

- The student is meeting the learning standard expectations with increasing depth. This is not perfection.
- Don't know/unsure.

The correct definition for descriptive grade “Extending” is: The student is meeting the learning standard expectations with increasing depth. This is not perfection.

**Figure 5: Canadian Parents' Ability to Identify What Descriptive Grade “Extending” Means**



As shown in figure 5 above, only about one quarter of parents (26%) could correctly identify what the descriptive grade “Extending” means. When asked to identify which description matches the term “Extending,” the most popular choice amongst K-12 parents was “don't know/unsure” (40% of parents). At least six in 10 parents across all regions were not able to correctly identify the definition of “Extending.”

### **How well do BC parents understand descriptive grading?—“Extending”**

In BC, 43% of parents chose the wrong description of “Extending” when asked, which was the highest proportion of any province. BC parents were less likely to respond “don't know/unsure” (23%) than the national average (40%) or parents in any other province, but 66% of BC parents either did not know what “Extending” means or were unable to identify the meaning of the term. Parents in BC were more likely than the national average



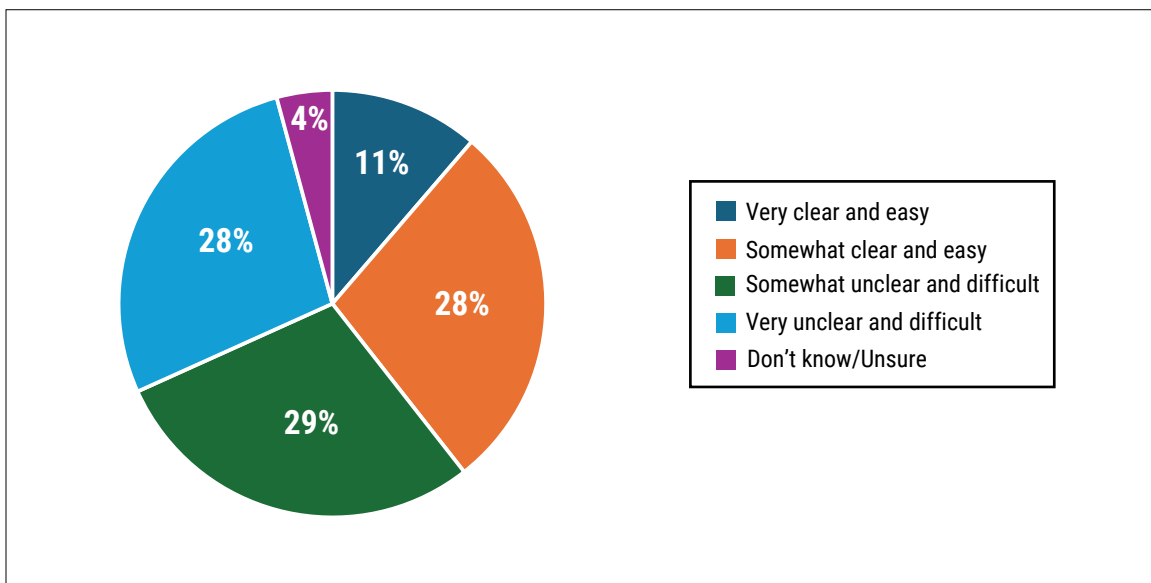
to correctly identify the term “Extending” (34% versus 26%, respectively) but parents in Atlantic Canada and Quebec were more likely than BC parents to correctly identify the term “Extending.” In other words, despite these terms already being used on K-9 report cards in BC, BC parents’ understanding of this term was not consistently higher than that of parents in other provinces.

The Leger poll then asked parents of K-12 children:

*In terms of your child’s academic performance, how easy is it for you to identify what the term “Emerging” means?*

Respondents could select one of the following: Very clear and easy, somewhat clear and easy, unclear and difficult, somewhat unclear and difficult, and don’t know/unsure.

**Figure 6: Canadian Parents’ Understanding of Descriptive Grade “Emerging”**



As shown in figure 6 above, more than half of parents (57%) found the descriptive grade “Emerging” unclear and difficult to understand, with 28% finding it “very unclear and difficult” to understand and 29% finding it somewhat unclear and difficult. Meanwhile, 39% of parents found “Emerging” clear and easy to understand, with 11% saying it was “very clear and easy” and 28% saying it was “somewhat clear and easy.” Another four percent of parents responded “don’t know/unsure.”

Again, using a list of definitions for descriptive report card terms based on the BC Ministry of Education's own documents, Leger provided parents a list of definitions and asked them to correctly match the definition with the report card term.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

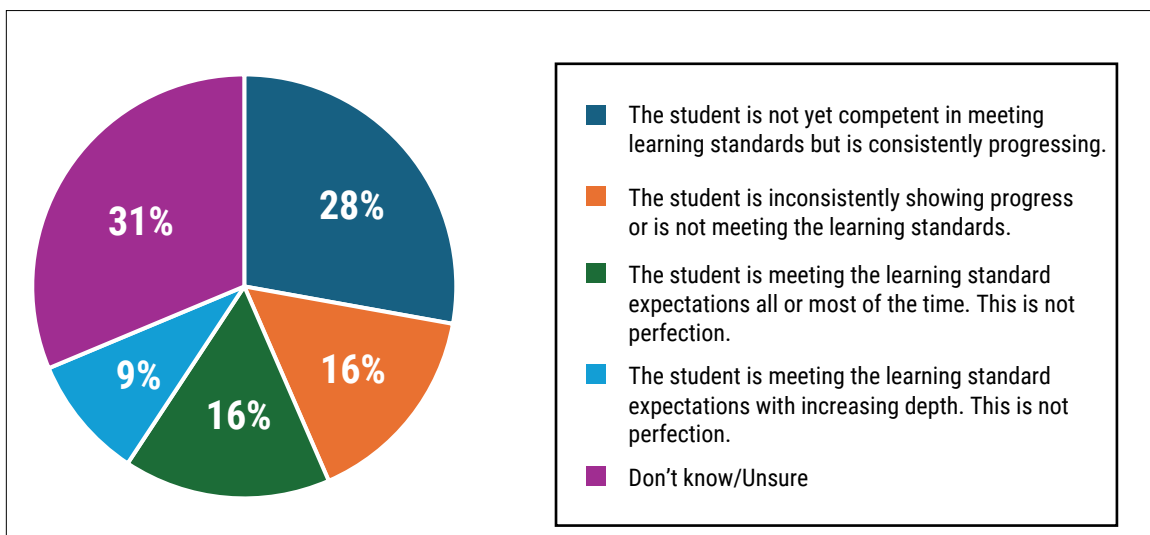
*To the best of your ability, please indicate which description matches the following report card term: "Emerging." If you do not know, please indicate that.*

Respondents could select one of the following definitions, based on the BC Ministry of Education's documents:

- The student is not yet competent in meeting learning standards but is consistently progressing.
- The student is inconsistently showing progress or is not meeting the learning standards.
- The student is meeting the learning standard expectations all or most of the time. This is not perfection.
- The student is meeting the learning standard expectations with increasing depth. This is not perfection.
- Don't know/Unsure

The correct definition for descriptive grade "Emerging" is: The student is inconsistently showing progress or is not meeting the learning standards.

**Figure 7: Canadian parents' ability to identify what descriptive grade "Emerging" means**



As shown in figure 7 above, fewer than three in 10 parents (28%) could correctly identify what the descriptive grade “Emerging” means. When asked to identify which description matches the term “Emerging,” the most popular choice amongst K-12 parents was “don’t know/unsure” (31% of parents).

### **How well do BC parents understand descriptive grading?—“Emerging”**

Parents in BC were more likely than the national average to correctly identify the term “Emerging” (36% versus 28%, respectively), and were less likely to respond “don’t know/unsure” (17%) than the national average (31%) or parents in any other province. This is expected given these terms are already used on BC report cards in grades K-9. However, the majority (64%) of BC parents still could not correctly identify the term. Similarly, at least two-thirds of parents in other provinces could not correctly identify the meaning of the term. (Leger, 2024)

Uncertainty around descriptive grading terms was especially true among respondents who are 35 or older, and non-immigrants.

## Parental Understanding of Letter Grades—In Practice

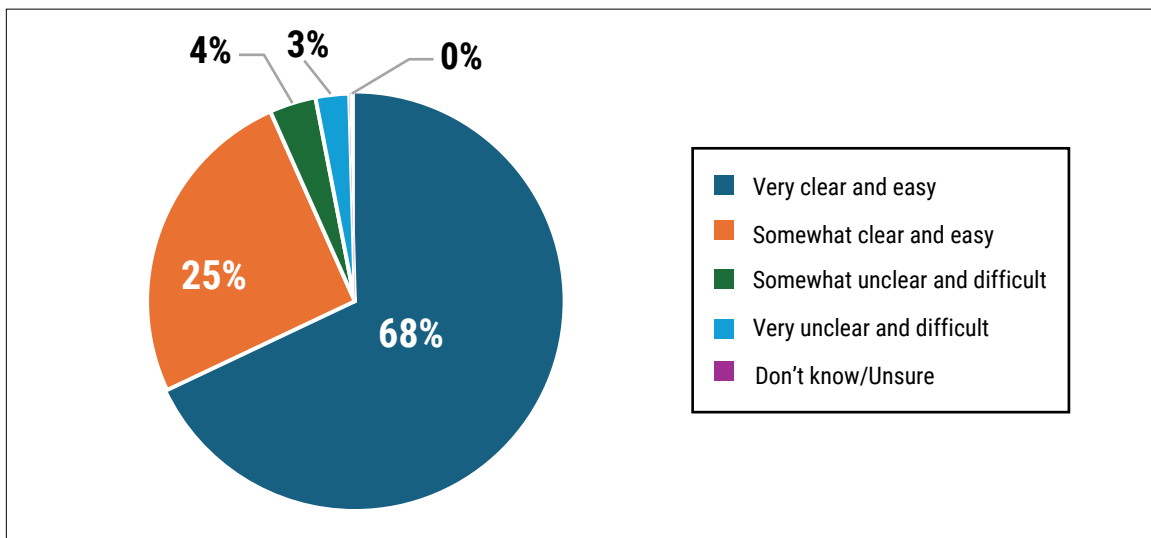
When surveyed, Canadian parents—and parents in BC—find letter grades significantly clearer and easier to understand than descriptive grades on the BC government's proficiency scale. Further, a larger proportion of Canadian parents can correctly identify what the letter grades mean, than they can for descriptive grades.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

*In terms of your child's academic performance, how easy is it for you to identify what the letter grade "A" means?*

Respondents could select one of the following: Very clear and easy, somewhat clear and easy, unclear and difficult, somewhat unclear and difficult, and don't know/unsure.

**Figure 8: Canadian Parents' Understanding of Letter Grade "A"**



As shown in figure 8 above, more than nine in 10 parents (93%) say that the meaning of the letter grade "A" is clear and easy to understand. A large majority—68%—of parents found it very clear and easy to understand and another 25% found it somewhat clear and easy to understand. Only seven percent of parents found this unclear and difficult, with four percent finding it somewhat unclear and difficult and three percent finding it very unclear and difficult.

The Leger poll then asked parents of K-12 children:

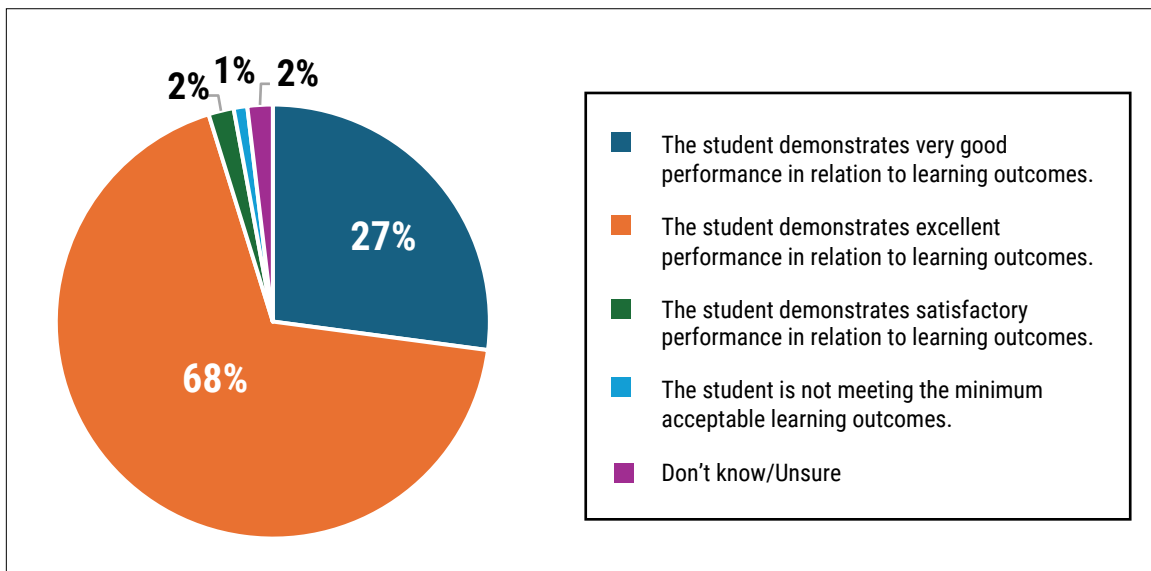
*To the best of your ability, please indicate which description matches the following letter grade: "A." If you do not know, please indicate that.*

Respondents could select one of the following definitions, based on the BC Ministry of Education's documents:

- The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student demonstrates excellent performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student is not meeting the minimum acceptable learning outcomes.
- Don't know/Unsure.

The correct definition for letter grade "A" is: The student demonstrates excellent performance in relation to learning outcomes.

**Figure 9: Canadian Parents' Ability to Identify What Letter Grade "A" Means**



As shown in figure 9 above, about seven in 10 parents (68%) could correctly identify what the letter grade "A" means. Three in 10 parents (27%) did not select the correct definition

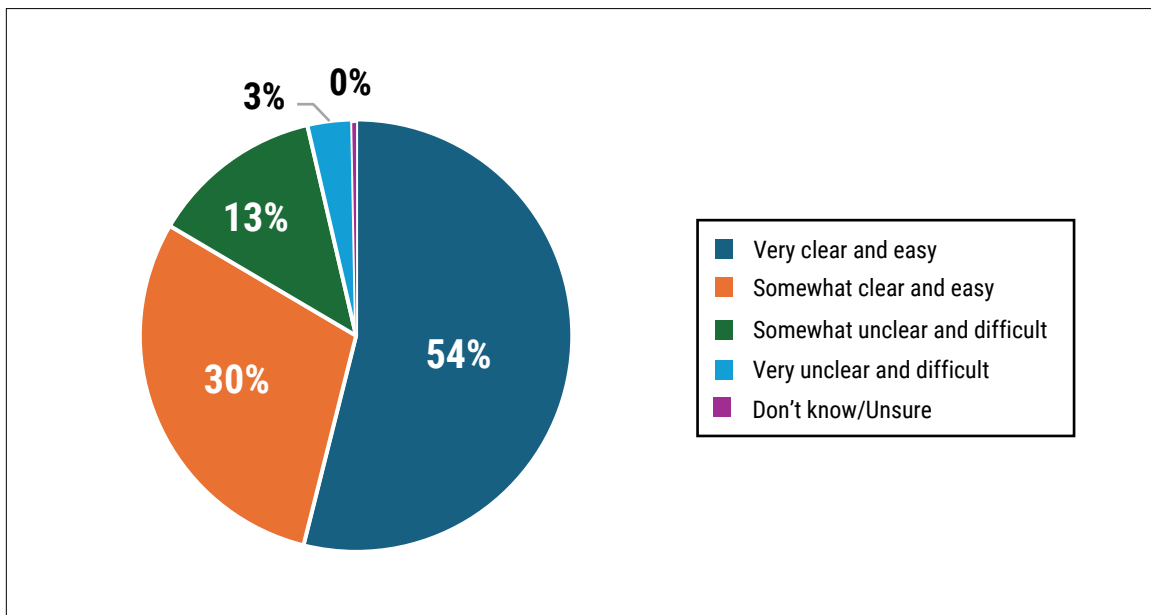
for letter grade “A,” but they came close, selecting “very good” student performance rather than “excellent” student performance. Only two percent of parents responded “don’t know/unsure.”

The Leger poll also asked parents of K-12 children:

*In terms of your child’s academic performance, how easy is it for you to identify what the letter grade “C” means?*

Respondents could select one of the following: Very clear and easy, somewhat clear and easy, unclear and difficult, somewhat unclear and difficult, and don’t know/unsure.

**Figure 10: Canadian Parents’ Understanding of Letter Grade “C”**



As shown in figure 10 above, eight in 10 parents (83%) say they find the letter grade “C” clear and easy to understand. The majority of parents (54%) found the meaning of letter grade “C” very clear and easy to understand, and another 30% found it somewhat clear and easy to understand. A total of 16% of parents found the meaning of the letter grade “C” unclear and difficult to understand, with 13% finding it somewhat unclear and difficult to understand and only three percent finding it very unclear and difficult to understand. There was virtually no uncertainty, with zero percent of parents responding “don’t know/unsure.”

The Leger poll then asked parents of K-12 children:

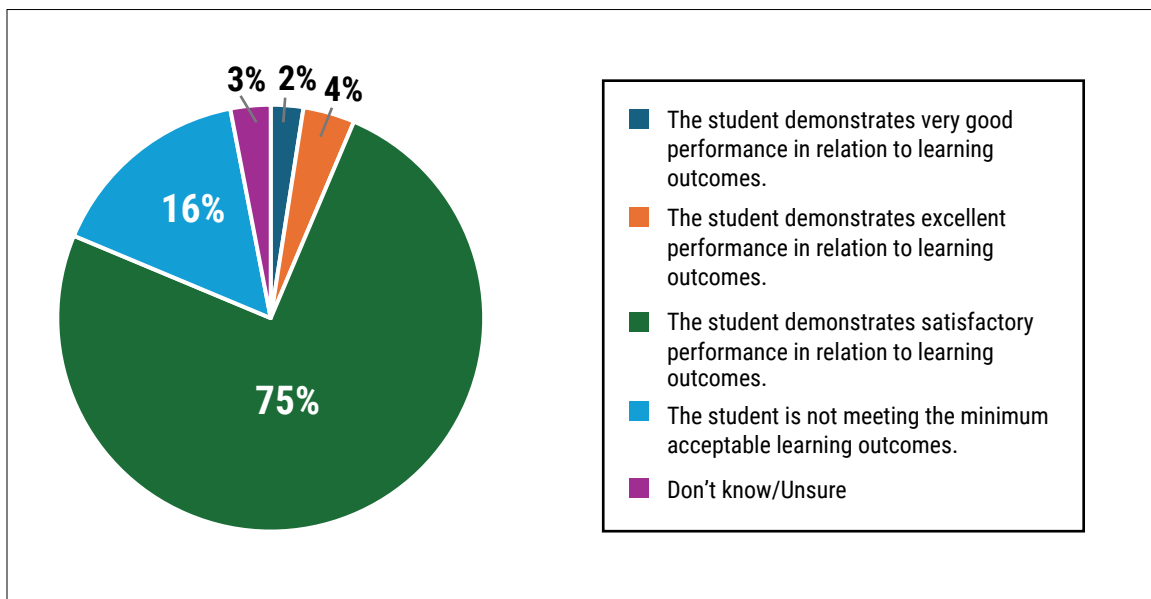
*To the best of your ability, please indicate which description matches the following letter grade: "C." If you do not know, please indicate that.*

Respondents could select one of the following definitions, based on the BC Ministry of Education's documents:

- The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student demonstrates excellent performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to learning outcomes.
- The student is not meeting the minimum acceptable learning outcomes.
- Don't know/Unsure.

The correct definition for letter grade "C" is: The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to learning outcomes for the course.

**Figure 11: Canadian Parents' Ability to Identify What Letter Grade "C" Means**



As shown in figure 11 above, three quarters of parents (75%) could correctly identify what the letter grade “C” means. Only three percent of parents responded “don’t know/unsure.”

There was no significant difference in BC parents’ understanding of letter grading versus the national average.



## Conclusion

A clear majority of Canadian parents with children in K-12 schools find letter grading easier to understand, in terms of their child's academic performance, than the BC government's new descriptive grading.

When asked in theory, parents are divided on whether switching from letter grades to descriptive grading—based on what is now used on K-9 report cards in BC—would make their child's academic progress clearer and easier to understand. In practice, however, Canadian parents find letter grades significantly clearer and easier to understand than descriptive grades. When asked more specifically to match a letter grade with its definition, a large majority of Canadian parents with kids in K-12 schools can do this with success. However, when asked specifically to match a descriptive grade with its definition, the largest proportion of Canadian parents are unsure of how to do so. When asked, fewer than three in 10 parents can successfully match a descriptive grade with its definition. Even in BC, where descriptive grades on the province's proficiency scale have already been rolled out, parents struggle to correctly match the report card terms with their definitions and find letter grades much clearer and easier to understand.

Provincial governments considering changes to report card grading should be mindful that according to parents of children in K-12 schools across Canada, these changes do not make report cards clearer and easier for parents to understand their child's academic progress.

## Appendix

### British Columbia Provincial Proficiency Scale (Descriptive Grading)

Wording based on BC Ministry of Education Documents cited in References section.

#### *Emerging*

The student is inconsistently showing progress or is not meeting the learning standards.

#### *Developing*

The student is not yet competent in meeting learning standards but is consistently progressing.

#### *Proficient*

The student is meeting the learning standard expectations all or most of the time. This is not perfection.

#### *Extending*

The student is meeting the learning standard expectations with increasing depth. This is not perfection.

### Letter Grades

Wording based on BC Ministry of Education Documents cited in References section.

#### *A*

The student demonstrates excellent or outstanding performance in relation to learning outcomes for the course.

#### *B*

The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to learning outcomes for the course.

#### *C*

The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to learning outcomes for the course.

#### *F*

The student is not demonstrating minimally acceptable learning in relation to the learning outcomes for the course.

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## About the Author

Paige MacPherson is associate director of Education Policy for the Fraser Institute. Paige contributes policy analysis and commentary to major media outlets and research organizations across Canada, focusing on education policy, fiscal policy and government accountability. She holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Calgary School of Public Policy and a B.A. from Dalhousie University. Her writing has been published in the *Financial Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Sun*, the *Hub*, and the *Toronto Star*, among others.



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Our mission is to improve the quality of life for Canadians, their families, and future generations by studying, measuring, and broadly communicating the effects of government policies, entrepreneurship, and choice on their well-being.

*Notre mission consiste à améliorer la qualité de vie des Canadiens et des générations à venir en étudiant, en mesurant et en diffusant les effets des politiques gouvernementales, de l'entrepreneuriat et des choix sur leur bien-être.*

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