A SCHOOL LEADER’S GUIDE TO STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

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foreword by Robert J. Marzano
Grading is the primary means of reporting feedback about a student’s level of learning. Robert Marzano (2010) described three types of grading: (1) norm-referenced grading, which involves comparing one student’s performance to other students’ performance; (2) self-referenced grading, which involves comparing a student’s current performance to his or her past performance; and (3) standards-based grading, which involves assessing a student’s competency with specific topics and standards within each subject area. In standards-based grading, students only begin to work on higher levels of knowledge and skill in a subject area once they have demonstrated competence, or proficiency, at lower levels. We agree with Susan Brookhart (2011) that standards-based grading is the most appropriate method of grading in a standards-based system and thus limit our discussion in this book to helping educators implement standards-based grading in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

Before we begin, however, we must clarify our terminology. Because the term standards-based is used more often than standards-referenced in educational conversations and publications about grading, educators often fail to make a distinction between the two systems. Nevertheless, there are critical differences.

### Standards-Referenced Versus Standards-Based Grading

Grant Wiggins (1993, 1996) and Marzano (2010) described standards-referenced grading as a system in which teachers give students feedback about their proficiency on a set of defined standards and schools report students’ levels of performance on the grade-level standards, but students are not moved forward (or backward) to a different set of standards based on their level of competence. Marzano (2010) observed, “The vast majority of schools and districts that claim to have standards-based systems in fact have standards-referenced systems” (pp. 18–19).

Standards-based grading is a system of assessing and reporting that describes student progress in relation to standards. In a standards-based system, a student can demonstrate mastery of a set of standards and move immediately to a more challenging set of
standards. This means that if a third-grade student masters the entire set of third-grade mathematics standards in two months, that student immediately begins to work on fourth-grade mathematics standards. The same principle applies to all grade levels and subject areas: as soon as a student demonstrates competency with all of the standards for a specific level and subject area, he or she immediately begins working on the next level of standards for that subject area.

In order for students to move ahead to more difficult standards when they achieve proficiency with current standards (as in an authentic standards-based grading system), educators need to assign grades that clearly communicate students’ current levels of performance for the standards they are working on. To achieve this type of feedback, grades must be based solely on students’ current levels of performance with specific standards. Unfortunately, many grading practices currently used in the United States base grades on an assortment of additional factors beyond academic performance, such as a student’s level of effort, innate aptitude, rule compliance, attendance, social behaviors, attitudes, or other nonachievement measures (Friedman & Frisbie, 2000; Ornstein, 1995). Including these measures in students’ grades creates systems in which “grades are so imprecise that they are almost meaningless” (Marzano, 2000, p. 1). Genuine standards-based grading practices separate what students know and can do from how they behave and other nonachievement measures. Thus, while there are many ways that schools can improve student achievement, changing grading practices may be the most expedient way to address multiple issues at once.

**Why Change Grading Practices?**

Douglas Reeves (2008) stated, “If you wanted to make just one change that would immediately reduce student failure rates, then the most effective place to start would be challenging prevailing grading practices” (p. 85). The most effective grading practices provide accurate, specific, and timely feedback designed to improve student performance (Marzano, 2000, 2007; O’Connor, 2007). Rick Wormeli (2006) explained what a grade ought to be:

> A grade is supposed to provide an accurate, undiluted indicator of a student’s mastery of learning standards. That’s it. It is not meant to be a part of a reward, motivation, or behavioral contract system. If the grade is distorted by weaving in a student’s personal behavior, character, and work habits, it cannot be used to successfully provide feedback, document progress, or inform our instructional decisions regarding that student—the three primary reasons we grade. (p. 19)

Unfortunately, many grades do not fit this description.

More than a third of all teachers believe that grades can serve as a meaningful punishment, despite extensive evidence showing this is not the case (Canady & Hotchkiss, 1989). David Conley (2000) found little relationship between the grade a teacher gave and whether or not a student was proficient. Multiple studies have shown that teachers who teach the same subject or course at the same grade level within the same school
often consider drastically different criteria in assigning grades to students’ performance (Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1995; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). Reeves (2008) stated:

Three commonly used grading policies . . . are so ineffective they can be labeled as toxic. First is the use of zeroes for missing work. . . . Second is the practice of using the average of all scores throughout the semester. . . . Third is the use of the “semester killer”—the single project, test, lab, paper, or other assignment that will make or break students. (pp. 85–86)

These practices create inconsistencies in assigning grades that would likely never be tolerated in other venues, such as sports or medicine. Reeves (2008) added, “The same school leaders and community members who would be indignant if sports referees were inconsistent in their rulings continue to tolerate inconsistencies that have devastating effects on student achievement” (p. 86).

Thomas Guskey (2011) compared the current practice of combining multiple measures into overall omnibus grades to combining unrelated health measures into a single score:

If someone proposed combining measures of height, weight, diet, and exercise into a single number or mark to represent a person’s physical condition, we would consider it laughable. How could the combination of such diverse measures yield anything meaningful? Yet every day, teachers combine aspects of students’ achievement, attitude, responsibility, effort, and behavior into a single grade that’s recorded on a report card—and no one questions it. (p. 19)

Andy Fleenor, Sarah Lamb, Jennifer Anton, Todd Stinson, and Tony Donen (2011) described grades as a game and explained that, sometimes, the best grades simply go to the students who do the most work:

Quantity should not trump quality. Grades should be based on what students know and can do, rather than on how much work they can (and will) complete. Students should receive regular and specific feedback about what they know and don’t know. Offering regular, specific feedback and grading that are based on learning and not behavior will have an immediate positive impact on your school. It will redefine students’ role in the learning process, completely alter communication patterns with students and parents, and ultimately will improve performance top to bottom. (p. 52)

As Fleenor and his colleagues pointed out, resolving grading-system problems can have positive impacts throughout an educational system.

Grades should provide feedback to students, document their progress, and help teachers make decisions about what instruction a student needs next (Wormeli, 2006). When grades fulfill these goals, the effects on a school or district can be significant. Reeves (2011) found that effective grading policies reduced student failures, leading to a cascade of unexpected benefits: reduced discipline problems, increased college credits, more elective courses, improved teacher
morale, fewer hours of board of education time diverted to suspensions and expulsions, and added revenues for the entire system based on a higher number of students continually enrolled in school. (p. 79)

Although changing grading systems can be challenging for school leaders and administrators, “the benefits are so great that it’s worth doing” (Reeves, 2008, p. 87).

According to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2007), grading reform has been hindered by the idea that individual teachers should make their own decisions about how to teach:

We believe teaching is currently far too personalized. Without long-term results and shared analysis of goals to study together or shared standards of best practice to which we refer, teachers have little choice but to (over)emphasize personal beliefs, habits, and style. Naturally, then, any criticism of our teaching makes most of us defensive and resistant to the message. (p. 111)

This overemphasis on personalization has resulted in grading systems that often defeat one of the main purposes of grades: feedback. Reeves (2006) stated,

When it comes to providing students with feedback—and grading is one of many powerful sources of feedback—then I will argue that the freedom long enjoyed by private practitioners must take place within boundaries of fairness, mathematical accuracy, and effectiveness. (pp. 113–114)

Many teachers are forced to make their own decisions regarding grading because they do not receive any formal training on various grading methods, the advantages and shortcomings of each, or the effects of different grading policies on students (Brookhart & Nitko, 2008; Stiggins, 1991, 2008). Richard Lomax (1996) followed a group of elementary preservice teachers from just before their assessment course through the completion of student teaching. Although many issues were noted, grading proved to be the greatest source of difficulty for these teachers.

In many cases, the transition to standards-based grading requires educators, students, and parents to rethink and reframe beliefs about grading that they have held for many years. The process requires reflection, new learning, and changes in practice. Principals and administrators must also understand the research and theory behind standards-based grading. This large a transition requires a commitment to collegiality and collaboration, because improving grading systems and policies inherently involves improving schoolwide curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Essentially, standards-based grading is a high-leverage strategy that has the power to improve every other element of the system, which can be seen in the following accounts from a principal and several students.

**Standards-Based Grading From a Principal’s Perspective**

To demonstrate the power of standards-based grading, we begin with the story of a building leader. Julie Williams is the principal of Lincoln Elementary in St. Charles,
Missouri, and her school’s work with standards-based grading helped transform the school into a place where students are invested in their learning and work to achieve personal growth toward their goals. Julie explained that implementing standards-based grading meant helping students understand exactly what needed to be mastered at each grade level, where they were in the learning progression, and how they could work together to meet their goals. Even first graders are now able to explain what they are working on and how their learning activities will help them reach their goals. Students feel a sense of empowerment and work even harder since they are a part of the process. Although the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch has increased from 56.1 to 60.9 over the past four years, student achievement results have steadily improved. Figure 1.1 shows Lincoln Elementary students’ average scores compared to district and state average scores on the Missouri Assessment of Progress (MAP).

![Average Student Scores](source)

Source: Created by Julie Williams using data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013. Used with permission.

Figure: 1.1: 2012–2013 MAP results.

Julie said, “It has been an amazing journey, and there is no doubt that our work with standards-based grading has had a strong impact not only on our academic gains, but also on the culture of our school” (personal communication, August 29, 2013).

**Standards-Based Grading From Students’ Perspectives**

To emphasize the importance of standards-based grading for students, we also present a few stories from students. The first is from Alex, a middle school student whose teacher, Kristin Poage, implemented standards-based grading at Jackson Creek Middle School in Bloomington, Indiana. Alex shared his perspective on the new grading and feedback system in a letter to his teacher:
Dear Ms. Poage,

When I earn a “3” on a paper that tells me that I have reached the goal and that I did everything right. I like knowing if I did it right and if I didn’t get a “3” I know that I did something wrong. Plus the teachers’ little notes also help me know that either I did a good job or got something wrong. They also help me know where I made the mistake and what I did wrong. I also know that I get a chance to redo something if I didn’t do it right and that reassures me about my grade. Also, just having the standard on my paper tells me if I am performing to the standard of the assignment. When I get the paper back and it doesn’t have a “3” I know that it isn’t meeting the standards of the assignment and that I can do better. If I don’t get a “3” I don’t get down on myself, but instead I find out that I did something wrong and that I can redo it so that I meet the school and personal standard of the paper/assignment. I personally like having a number and a note. Like a “3” and a “Great job, keep it up” or a “2” and a “Good job on the grammar section, but the punctuation section needs some work. Let’s work to redo it and turn it in tomorrow, I know you can do better!” That helps me a lot.

Alex

Source: Thomas Drew Frey. Used with permission.

Alex’s letter highlights several of the benefits of standards-based grading. Rather than achieving an A and moving on, students are challenged to deeply understand content.

The next two stories are from high school students in Jeff Flygare’s class at Air Academy High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Matt writes:

The standards-based grading system has had a profound impact on my development as a high school student. I view it as the only fair way to measure a student’s academic performance in the classroom. All academic achievement should be measured by progress instead of an assiduous amount of tests and homework assignments. The progress that a student makes truly reflects all that is learned in the class. I first experienced the standards-based grading system during my sophomore year of high school. Like all of the other students and parents, I was rather skeptical at first. As the year began, I noticed my grades in the class were not all that desirable. At this point, I was even contemplating dropping out of the class. Luckily, I made a courageous decision to stick it out.

Eventually, I began to start getting better grades in the class. I noticed this transition around the middle of the semester. Finally, as the first semester ended, I had the grades that I desired. However, the standards-based grading system is intended to do much more than produce desirable grades. The real purpose of the system is to allow teachers and students to track each individual’s learning progress throughout the year. So there I stood at the end of the first semester, with the grades I was hoping for, yet I was still curious about the true effects of standards-based grading. Since we tracked
our grades on the four-point scale throughout the semester, I was able to find the assignments from the beginning and end of the semester. I found one essay that I wrote at the very beginning of the school year and an essay that I wrote at the very end of the semester. My writing had improved by an incredible amount. I noticed great advancement in my sentence structure, diction, analysis, and much more.

So then I asked myself this question, “Was it really possible for standards-based grading to produce such unbelievable results in such little time?” The simple answer is yes. The system has taught me to enhance my learning by focusing on specific topics within a broader subject. This is a very important process that most classes don’t emphasize. In order to be a truly well rounded student, one must accentuate the areas that they excel at and focus on the areas that need improvement. By making clear cut goals and tracking the progress, the standards-based grading system maximizes any student’s potential for academic success. Making clear cut goals also helps a student make sure that they have learned the necessary aspects of a class. The standards-based grading system has had a great impact on me as a high school student and I hope more students across the nation will be given the same opportunity I have had.

Source: John Najarian. Used with permission.

Madeline shared her perspective:

Standards based grading is a more human system of evaluation because it places more emphasis on the student in the classroom. Rather than being a hard average of points with set expectations, the standards based system allows for more exploration and learning because of its flexibility. The student is aware of exactly what is required for success, rather than being graded obscurely. This means that rather than measuring a student’s ability to perform according to a specific system or subject, standards based grading is more likely to measure true learning.

Because of the clarity, simplicity, and adjustability of the standards based system, the student is more likely to succeed. The student is also more motivated, because unlike traditional grading, the standards based system is a positive reinforcement system. Rather than feeling defeated as the student watches grades decline over the course of the semester, the student will see improvement, feel less stress, and be more likely to enjoy and participate in learning.

The advantage to the student under the standards based grading system is that the student is empowered in the classroom. The student can take control of his or her grades, due to clearly defined goals and a healthier incentive to learn.

Source: Sophie Winkelmann. Used with permission.
As these communications exemplify, in a standards-based system, students take ownership for their learning and are intrinsically motivated to increase their knowledge and skill, rather than just collecting as many points as possible. These students’ voices are reminders that students are the true consumers of education. As Neil Postman (1994) reminded us, “Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see” (p. xi). Standards-based grading allows educators to teach students powerful lessons about taking responsibility for their own learning journeys.

Summary

Standards-based grading is an effective way to give feedback and evaluate students’ performances using clearly defined criteria for specific learning standards. This clear communication gives students concrete guidance and useful feedback that they can use to improve their performance in specific areas. Although the shift from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading may require educators, students, and parents to reframe their existing beliefs and expectations about grades, the benefits to all stakeholders are powerful enough to warrant the change.