

**IMPLEMENTATION OF STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS**

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

Introduction

We as educators work and live in a society of instant gratification. Adults and children alike are all looking for the instant high of whatever it is they are seeking. As adults, we want to know that the decisions that we have made and the roads we have chosen to travel are going to be putting us in a better position to be successful in life; we want these answers quickly. In our adult lives we use many indicators to judge how successful we are. Money, homes, cars, etc. However, by simply examining of those indicators in a vacuum, very little can be gleaned about the work it required to achieve that result, or even more troubling what potential problems they conceal.

Children are no different. They want to know if the decisions that they have made and the roads they have chosen to travel are putting themselves in the position to be more successful as students. Success in the classroom to them can mean “A’s” and “B’s” in whatever class is worrying them. Although this definition of success leaves out the social emotional success that they may be craving, it also does play a role in determining that feeling of success as well. But these letters and percentages can themselves be

misleading. In an attempt to provide students with clearly understandable grades, we as educators have been contributing to the problem of practice that this capstone seeks to address. For students, the instant gratification that they seek comes in the form of the grades that we assign. The problem occurs when the grades that are given fail to articulate just exactly what students have learned.

In most cases, grades are the most prevalent source of evaluation that students are given, acknowledging of course that there are institutions that do not use grades as a means of evaluation. However, the education system as a whole largely relies on grading to communicate student achievement. But what do our grades tell students? This small question has led to my larger research question, *How can Standards-Based Grading be successfully implemented in a Secondary education setting?* Standards-Based Grading and Instruction can be defined as assessing students on their current knowledge of agreed upon learning targets/standards. Simply put, what this means for classrooms is that students grades represent the current level of knowledge that they are performing at based on clearly communicated learning goals. Contrast this with traditional grading practices that represent a collection of points on assignments averaged out on a 100 point scale and reported as current level of knowledge. The key difference between these two methods is context, much more to come on this subject. For now let me state it this way, reporting grades without context is much like trying to eat cereal without a bowl, a mess.

Chapter One of this text will discuss the foundations of my professional experience in working with students from a variety of backgrounds and ages. The variety of students highlights for myself and readers the persistent problem of grading methods

currently in use. Chapter One will also discuss the behaviors and trends I observed as a teacher and why my research question is worthy of consideration by anyone in the profession. Most importantly for readers, Chapter One will highlight my own disastrous attempt to implement grading reform individually and without proper preparation.

My Journey to the Capstone Question/Project

The reason that I chose grading reform as my capstone focus was twofold. One, there is a genuine need to have an honest discussion about the grading methods used in schools and the problems of accuracy and fairness; and two, during my first year of teaching, I attempted to make a change in my grading system that went spectacularly wrong and I wanted to better understand my own shortcomings, more to come on this subject later. To better understand why this problem of practice is felt so clearly to me, context is required. My passion for my research question comes from my work as a 7th grade Social Studies teacher. Since 2014 I have served in a high needs middle school, sometimes referred to as “at-risk” school due to our high percentages of free and reduced lunch students as well as special education students. During this time, I have observed something interesting with my students. Although I had a gradebook that they could access, and although I clearly knew where each student stood as far as their academic abilities, they had no idea. They constantly worried about where they stood as far as their grades in my classroom or misinterpreted the meaning of grades altogether. Herein lies the disconnect between practitioner and student, a communication problem that has shaped my desire to pursue further research what our classroom processes are telling

students about their academic performance. Before I engage in this academic problem, a further word about my experience is necessary.

It is appropriate that Standards-Based Instruction and Grading preaches to students the importance of trial and error in the learning process, because that accurately describes my first years of trying to implement grading reform. What I preached to my students was that learning does not stop when a grade has been given on a particular assignment, rather that learning must take place constantly as assignments are intended to be connected to each other. Again, perfectly simple concept for adult educators to understand. But what I found was that communicating to students that learning must take place through trial and error, practice and performance, was anathema to them. What they wanted, and to a wider extent, what their parents wanted was to know the answer to the same question, “What grade does my child have?” This question is a complicated one in my experience.

Educators want students to understand the intrinsic value of the process of practice to help them perform better on their exams. I have done my best to use sports metaphors and performance metaphors to describe why I give them homework. For example, professional athletes must practice their craft in order to produce at the highest levels, in my classroom this principle holds true as well! But all too often, the assignments that I graded and returned were found in the trash can, or only slightly better, the recycling can. The learning had been completed, they wrote down the answers to prove it, then they left the learning behind. When it came time for test taking, the learning they left behind may or may not return.

What was worse, I had many students making rough calculations to see which assignments they could skip and still achieve a satisfactory grade. This is not learning. This is educational roulette, hoping that you as the student can guess which assignments to put effort in on and which ones can be brushed off. Naturally, I asked myself how do I break this cycle of “How does this assignment help my grade” and point counting to a system of continual learning and mastery of concepts or skills. What I realized is that my own grading and classroom processes were reinforcing the very problem I sought to fix. As any educator worth his or her salt, I decided that drastic changes needed to happen within my own room. A short discussion about how to not attempt a grading transition is warranted.

My gradebook, as mandated by my school district, is weighted to favor tests and performances, also known as summative work, over the daily work and assignments, also known as formative work. Following what little I knew about Standards-Based Instruction and Grading and its promises of producing students that sought mastery of content over arbitrary points, I jumped in feet first. I stopped grading formative work for points. I instead gave only numerical feedback and hoped that kids would understand the value of what I was doing for them! For example, I gave a student a 3 out of 4 on an assignment rather than a letter grade. This was supposed to mean to the student that they, “understood the skill with very little help from the teacher.” However, what the student understood was that he or she got a C on that assignment. Despite my posting of rubrics (See Figure 1) around the room with the verbiage above, the numerical value of 3 out of 4 is what stuck in the minds of students. What was worse, I had

(Figure 1)

Standards-Based Grading Rubric

Where are you on this chart? What do you need from Mr. S to move down?

1	I do not understand the standard and what is expected of me. I need help!
2	I sort of understand the skill but need a push in the right direction.
3	I understand the skill without help.
4	I understand the skill and could explain it to my fellow students.

placed the score in the gradebook under the section of “not for grading” which meant that it would not be calculated into their score. This meant that students would not see their grade move up or down at all regardless of their performance. Then came time for their tests.

I give six tests throughout the year and only two per trimester. I usually only give one homework assignment per unit that actually counted for their grades and it was a participation assignment that nearly everyone could get full points on. Given that the work my students were completing was left in a “not for grading” category, I discovered to my shock that for a large part of the trimester it is possible for my students to be passing with flying colors because they have completed the one participation assignment that counted even though they had not complete any of the assignments designed to increase their learning and prepare them for the test. When they attempted the test, naturally a great deal of them failed miserably. Parents saw their child’s grade swing four letter grades overnight. Needless to say, this cold turkey method of Standards-Based Grading transition worked for me, because the decision was made by a one-man team with only my own goals in mind but clearly, my students and parents has missed the boat. The goal was clear, the execution was fatally flawed and disconnected

The disconnect was between what I wanted students to achieve and what students wanted from the assignments. In my mind, students would understand that although a seven out of ten is technically passing, it should communicate that there was 30% of the work that was not good enough or had serious problems. My personal attempt shows how failure can occur very easily at this stage of grading if not properly communicated to

students and supported through Standards-Based Instruction. It was very clear as to what my grades were intended to communicate, but students did not understand.

It made perfect sense to me that students would want to discover the shortcomings in their work so they would not repeat them, but instead students focused on the fact that they had seven more points to put on their pile that would make up their final grade. Rather than grades serving as a tool to communicate current academic achievement for students, grades were viewed as a pile of points to be earned and lost. The learning that the assignment was designed to evoke had been completed. The assignment was turned in and the points were handed out. “How much will this help my grade?” or “How many points is this worth?” or “If I turned in this assignment, will it raise my grade?” The message that students have been taught is to chase the points awarded for assignments over the learning from the assignment.

My experience encourages me to increase my understanding of how and what grades communicate to students, parents, and teachers as well as the benefits of reevaluating the grading system that is in use in many classrooms.

And maybe the better question is how do students view the grades we give them? Using a broad brush to paint I would suggest that teachers want their grades to tell our students how prepared they are for assessment, but in my experience the reality my students view their grades as a pile of points and once that pile has reached a height that they are satisfied with, they stop piling on. Counteracting this mentality is a difficult thing to do. Having worked in public education since 2010 my observation is that challenging long held teaching/assessment practice is extremely difficult when you need

to bring along so many willing and unwilling participants. A review of chapter one followed by the literature review will follow.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed my twofold reasoning for my interest in grading and instructional reform in secondary schools. Both through my observations of student behavior as well as my own failures in successfully implementing Standards-Based Grading have encouraged me to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of grading reform. Current grading practices in our schools, to be referred to as traditional grading practices in chapter two of this capstone, have no basis in research.

Standards-Based Instruction and Grading represent a research supported means to accurately and fairly assess students knowledge. It was for this reason that I became encouraged to pursue this reform within my own classroom. My experience and enthusiasm represent a cautionary tale of how to approach reform effectively. Chapter two of my capstone will present the current literature surrounding traditional grading practices and the ways in which Standards Based Instruction and Grading can help address current problems of practice.

CHAPTER TWO

Clearing the Fog of Grading

Introduction

As a middle school teacher, I know how important it is to communicate clearly with students. The challenge educators face is that students and parents are missing the message about what their grades mean. Marzano and Heflebower (2011) state that current grading practices that assign an omnibus letter grade too often fail to communicate to the affected parties what that letter is supposed to mean. What does a C- in class really mean? Is that a representation of a lack of student content mastery? Or is that communicating that this student ranks somewhere below the average of other students in class. Through a review of the literature surrounding grading practices as well as my own experience in a middle school classroom, my research question *How can Standards-Based Grading be successfully implemented in a Secondary education setting?* aims to provide a solution to a problem of practice surrounding grading.

Chapter Two will review the current literature surrounding the issues of Standards-Based Grading and traditional grading systems as well as a rationale for why traditional grading systems can and should be reviewed in the context of accurate and fair

communication to students and parents about the successes and struggles of students in the classroom. First, a discussion of the current system of grading will also be discussed as it is beneficial to understand the perspective that more veteran staff members bring to the discussion of effective grading methods.

Second, an in depth discussion of the central tenets of transitioning away from traditional grading system and issues surrounding Standards-Based Grading will be discussed. In my experience as an educator whose school district is in a transitioning process towards Standards-Based Grading, the most common objections to transitioning from traditional grading practices are found in the areas of homework, formative assessment and feedback, student achievement and reassessment, and finally gradebook reporting. Current literature surrounding these subjects will be discussed to provide clarity for chapter three of this capstone. Let us first discuss what is referred to as traditional grading methods and how they are used in classrooms today.

Traditional Grading Methods

Brookhard (1994) describes how “[grades] engender emotional responses from teachers, students, and parents. They are, therefore, an excellent place to focus theory and refine practice” (p. 299). Ebel and Frisbie (as cited in Cross & Frary, 1999) state that, “school marks and grading have been the source of continuous controversy since the turn on the century” (p. 53) but that the controversy has failed to produce any significant changes when it comes to grading practices despite a large body of research pointing to the problems of reliability of the data that traditional grading methods can produce. A discussion of what traditional and grading methods looks like is therefore appropriate.

For our discussion, the process of grading in public K-12 schools can be split between two camps, the traditional grading methods that have dominated the education landscape for decades, and the new wave of grading that seeks to evaluate students based on their academic work only. Traditional grading methods are best defined by Jay Hooper and Ryan Cowell (2014) in their article *Standards-Based Grading: History Adjusted True Score*. These authors describe how “traditional grading practices are defined as students earning points on various types of assignments and assessments throughout a grading period and a teacher averaging those points on a 100-point scale to determine a student's overall grade” (p. 59). As former students in the majority of public K-12 schools, most readers will relate to Hooper and Cowell's (2014) description of traditional grading practices. I myself have vivid memories of grades being posted on white grid sheets next to student ID numbers that listed our scores and missing assignments followed by a letter grade. Grades earned not being related to any specific standards or learning targets is likely to be that of the reader. Also, many readers are likely old enough to think of learning targets and academic standards as being a largely new invention. Traditional grading practices are familiar, easy to understand, but are unfortunately problematic. What did my “B” actually mean? Did it mean that out of all the concepts we had discussed I understood a range of 80-89% of the content? Did it mean that I understood some concepts at an “A” Level but had some 0's that were weighing my average down? Grades without context are a mess indeed. The first evolution towards grading reform took the shape of learning targets and standards.

Support for learning targets and academic standards as new to education is supported by several researchers (Guskey 2005; Munoz & Guskey 2015; Tierney, Simon, and Charland 2011). These researchers describe how a well defined set of academic standards for learning have been the focus of education reform efforts, but that the process of revising grading has lagged behind. According to Brookhart (1994) grading generally remains a hodgepodge of assignments cobbled together and given a letter grade meaning. Even though educators are doing the work to focus their work on specific topics, rather than a potpourri of learning, the grading methods are making these efforts largely futile. This results in a situation that Brookhart (1994) describes as creating a lack of connection between traditional grading methods and best practice grading methods because “many teachers do lack training in classroom assessment” (p. 289).

Researchers such as Cross and Frary (1999) identify other factors for why teachers continue to use traditional grading methods despite the concerns about the accuracy. They describe how “Ebel and Frisbie identified three factors that contribute to the controversy surrounding marks and grading: Technical difficulties of measuring educational achievement, differences in educational philosophies, and the conflict in roles arising when teachers serve as both advocates and judges” (p. 53). These factors require more elaboration and counterargument.

Technical difficulties. The first argument made by Ebel and Frisbie is the easiest to discuss as the options for overcoming technical problems of grading in the classroom have exploded in number in recent years. Hoffmann and Ramierez (2018) describe the benefits of technology integration in the classroom when it comes to student

achievement. They note how technology supports teachers in moving away from the hand-written grading books filled with student names, assignments, and points laid out in a neat grid on their desks. Again, this may give the reader a sense of nostalgia of their time in school either as a student or educator. This method was slow and cumbersome. Students received a grade report at determined times throughout the year but in between those times they were often in the dark. In the modern classroom today, students have a much wider range of access to information about their grades. Electronic gradebooks as well as student gradebook applications allow access to current grades from any smartphone or computer.

Although tracking student achievement using technology historically has been a challenge, the advent of modern classroom grading technologies has greatly improved the situation. Electronic gradebooks do have their faults, when it comes to real time tracking and reporting of grades, they can be an invaluable tool for students and parents. Todd McIntire (2003) states that electronic gradebooks allow teachers to automatically calculate grades, weight assignments, and report multiple grades. It is fair to point out that this sentiment was written a full 16 years ago and does not take into account new advances. For example, my classrooms have evolved much further since that time. For example, in my work place electronic grading systems and the advent of teacher aides such as Google Classroom and laptop carts in rooms, the technological challenges to marking student achievement have largely been conquered.

Cheska Robinson (2017) in *Technology Tools for Paperless Formative Assessment* describes in detail half a dozen options for methods that teachers can use to

track and respond in real time to student progress in the classroom. For example, Robinson (2017) notes how “technology tools can help teachers quickly collect and make sense of the formative assessment data, which leads to more purposeful planning in instruction” (p. 24). Effective formative assessment practices will be discussed later in this chapter but technology in the modern classroom allows for more options and quicker formative feedback cycles. Technology tools available at my workplace include Google Classroom, Infinite Campus, Mastery Manager, and a wealth of other products exist to help manage the flow of information regarding student performance. When Ebel and Frisbie wrote their piece arguing that technical difficulties persisted in individual grading practices circa 1999, the classroom looked very different than it does today.

Personal Philosophy. Another factor identified by Ebel and Frisbie (1999), differences in educational philosophies, also contributes to the controversy of traditional grading need more explanation. For example, Guskey (2011) describes how grading processes that teachers use generally represent the educational philosophies that they bring to the classroom and how “education leaders must recognize obstacles to grading reform are rooted in tradition” (p. 17). The role of educational philosophies in grading practices provides a significant clue as to why teachers hang on to grading practices that measurement specialists challenge as being less than accurate representations of student achievement.

For example, one way that grades are not an accurate representation of student achievement is that they include a compilation of a great many things that are all related to school, however indirectly so. For example, Brookhart (1994) remarks that “looking at

grade uses fairly soon expands into questions of classroom management, student motivation, classroom instruction, and other issues of classroom context” (p. 291). Therefore, traditional grading techniques highlight a diverse set of student experiences, but actual knowledge of course content only factors in a small role for student grades. This is not to suggest that student achievement is ignored, rather that it can be blurred by a host of other factors. Students then can receive a skewed notion of their academic abilities. Marzano and Heflebower (2011) put the point this way:

These practices provide little useful information about a specific student. A student might have received an overall or “omnibus” letter grade of B, not because he had a solid grasp of the target content, but because he was exceptionally well behaved in class, participated in all discussions, and turned in all assignments on time. Likewise, a student may have received a percentage score of 62.9, not because she displayed significant gaps in understanding regarding the target content, but because she received a zero for tardiness on assignments or for disruptive behavior. (p. 34)

Teachers that grade in a traditional manner consider the soft skills that students are exposed to in school matter to an equal degree as the reportable aspects of student achievement. This is not to suggest that education should never consider such soft skills, as will be discussed in the “grade reporting” section below.

It is that grades have the primary function of communicating what students know (Marzano & Heflebower 2011; Guskey 2004; Tucker 2018). Whether a student shows up to class on time does not divulge information about how well students understand the

causes of World War II. The problem that traditional grading practices pose is that they are not necessarily consistent across the board for all students. This then calls into question the repeatability and reliability of the data; both of which are required for grading data to be meaningful according to Guskey and Munoz (2015). Soft skills are inherently subjective and student grades then become, by default, subjective. In interviewing fellow colleagues about traditional grading practices and the potential of adopting some method of grading reform, it is the removal of soft skills grading that finds the most push back.

Many colleagues in my own school view soft academic skills as going hand-in-hand with the hard academic skills when it comes to the assignment of grades. Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1959) noted that in elementary schools grading emphasized both cognitive skills and moral skills--arriving to class on time, being a respectful student-- as being equally important. Students arriving in middle school have had six years of elementary education that focused on soft skills. When considering a continuation of these grading methods it is worth noting what Cross and Frary (1999) assert, "Grades should communicate as objectively as possible the levels of education attainment in the subject, to encourage anything less is to distort the meaning of grades . . ." (p. 56). Continuing on the idea, Susan Brookhart (1994) refers to accounting for soft skills in combination with hard skills as "hodgepodge" grading. The implication of that label is that student grades are a rough combination of various tasks and performances, rather than an objective accounting for specific skills.

Finally, teachers acting as judges and jurors in the case of student performance also poses a challenge for reforming traditional grading practices. Brookhart (as cited in McMillan et al., 2002) studied the issue of the meaning of grades and she discovered that in a traditional based grading system. In her study she discovered that teachers were making subjective value judgements that swayed the outcome of grades, “an average or above-average student would get the grade earned, whereas a below-average student would get a break if there were sufficient effort to justify it” (McMillan et al., 2002, p. 205).

In other words teacher judgements are essentially putting a thumb on the scale of student performance. According to Edwards (2000) teachers inflating grades of certain students in order to protect self-esteem has had no effect on student achievement. Edwards (2000) states that this has actually resulted in a lowering of student self-concept when it comes to their view of their academic abilities. Also, providing a false idea of student ability may serve the teachers purpose in the short term, student moves on to the next subject, but in the long term that learning still has not been accounted for.

According to McMillian et al. (2002) the higher degree of subjectivity in grading is not only something that is meant to aid students, it also provides comfort for teachers because, “in some instances, the psychic comfort of the teacher comes at the expense of the student, which is the very point of the objective grading approach” (p. 205).

McMillian et al. (2002) makes me wonder does the student that receives this artificial boost in their grade also magically receive an artificial boost in their knowledge? Moving a student on to the next subject may provide both student and teacher a brief moment of

comfort, but the long term pain cannot be ignored. Acting as the judge and juror for students is a challenge that teachers must face head on, and according to Airasian (1984), “it is difficult for most teachers to separate their knowledge and perceptions of students from their grading judgments, and so many do not” (p. 96). This may be natural, given that teachers want their students to succeed. However, it is missing the core of what grading is intended to be about, communicating to students and parents what their child does and does not understand when it comes to academic content. The next section of the capstone will provide a closer look at what the purpose of grading should be in our classrooms.

Purpose of Grading

Given the role that grades play in a child’s education, it is imperative that not only students understand what their letter grades mean, but that teachers understand just exactly what their grades are currently communicating to students. As a teacher my goal needs to be helping students have a clear understanding of what their grades reflect. What does a “B” actually mean? Grading is the most critical communication between my students and me. Yet as described in Chapter One, my experience is that the traditional grading system as it stands is at best ambiguous. Anderson (2018) agrees with my sense of the importance of grades as a communication tool. This author suggests that the most important reason teachers grade students is to communicate with both the child and the adults responsible for them. The paramount role that grading plays in the lives of students means that ambiguity is unacceptable.

However, according to Guskey (2006) most teachers base their students' grades on more than academic performance (p. 670). "The difficulty is figuring out how to weight and combine the different pieces that go into the final mark" (Guskey, 2006, p. 670). Researchers Marty Pollio and Craig Hochbein (2015) address the problem this way, "Although grades have served as a common and important measure for assessing students, grades have lacked a uniform or standard meaning" (p. 2). Peters et al. (2017) suggests students generally lack an understanding about what their grades mean. Ultimately students have been trained to view their grades as piles of points, rather than representations of their hard work. In my experience the phrase, "this is the grade you have earned" is utterly anathema to students. And they are not entirely to blame.

The roots of the problems surrounding grading has been a focus of many researchers. Tierney et al. (2011) argue that many grading issues have their roots in a lack of congruence between classroom procedures and established measurement theory (p. 211). This suggests that although measurement theory argues that grading should be done in a certain manner, teachers often choose to stick with their preferred grading style regardless. Stiffins, Frisbie, and Giswold (as cited in Tierney et al., 2011) found that "15 experienced teachers followed less than half of 19 recommendations for grading identified in measurement textbooks" (p. 211). Cizek et al. (1995) agree with this assessment arguing that, "Many teachers seemed to have individual assessment policies that reflected their own individualistic values and beliefs about teaching" (p. 160). Individualistic values have no place in subjective grading of student work.

In a study on grading procedures, Brookhart (1993) describes grading as a system of payment for work completed in some classrooms. Brookhart (1994) argued the same point by showing there was clear evidence of a gulf between what was best practice in terms of grading and what teachers were doing. All of these findings suggest that grading practices vary wildly from the standpoint of best practice and should be examined for their validity. Bill Ferriter (as cited in Anderson 2018) puts a fine point on the problem, “Isn’t it hypocritical to preach about the importance of innovation in education while simultaneously clinging to a system of grading which is almost as archaic as it is useless” (p. 1) At this point, the reader may be asking themselves what is to be done about this mess? The next section of this capstone will present the current literature surrounding Standards-Based Grading reform that have been occurring in school districts around the nation.

Standards-Based Instruction and Grading

Discussions of the Standards-Based Grading movement often leave out a critical component, Standards-Based Instruction. In this paper, I will begin by discussing the importance of Standards-Based Instruction and how it leads directly to Standards-Based Grading and reporting. Current literature describe a Standards-Based Instruction and Grading system as a method to “compare student performance to established levels of proficiency in knowledge, understanding, and skills” (Mcmillan et al., 2009, p. 108). Establish levels of proficiency is language that is born out of the Common Core movement beginning in 2009 as stated in Pense et al. (2015). According to Tierney et al. (2011) a benefit of this form of grading is that “in theory, standards-based grading is

fairer for students' grades for report cards because achievement is more accurately represented in relation to learning expectations or standards" (p. 211). Another way to think about Tierney et al.'s (2011) comment is that Standards-Based Grading seeks to accurately represent what students know, rather than how much have they done. To represent what students know, Standards-Based Grading avoids being a compilation of loosely related assignments whose scores are piled at the end of any given trimester or semester, rather it is an assessment of what students have mastered according to predetermined academic standards.

Another way to think about Standards-Based Grading is described in *Teaching with the End in Mind: The Role of Standards-Based Grading* by Shippey et al. (2013).

Researcher B. E. Hirst (as cited in Shippey et al., 2018) sums up the ethos of Standards-Based Grading this way:

Its greatest promise seems to be its ability to place the student in a meaningful relationship with the domain of knowledge so that his progress can be measured based entirely on his individual efforts. What is more human than letting the learner know, in advance, what he is expected to know, under what conditions he will be expected to know, under what conditions he will be expected to demonstrate his knowledge, and the level or degree of acceptable performance he is to achieve. (p. 15)

The following sections are organized to mirror the order many teachers experience their classes in terms of grading starting with classwork and ending will discuss four

challenges of Standards-Based Instruction and Grading reform encountered in my school districts journey.

In my district four challenges associated with Standards-Based Instruction and Grading include:

- Role of homework as practice,
- Using formative assessment as feedback,
- Summative Assessment, and
- Gradebook Reporting.

Although these challenges are what I am experiencing in my effort to reform grading practices, understanding these will elaborate on current research and academic thought surrounding challenges of implementation of this grading reform.

Homework as Practice

Transitioning to Standards-Based Instruction and Grading in my school district begins with a discussion of what to do with homework and classwork. For the purposes of this paper I will consider classwork as the same as homework. This was a judgement call for me but within the context of my school district these two terms are used interchangeably. Mdjar et al. (2016) argues that homework effectiveness comes down to the motivation of the student and the applicability of the assignment given (p. 194).

Indeed Mdjar et al. (2016) in the following quote go on to explain that parental orientation towards homework also plays a significant role in student's perception of the work, "Research data indicate the notion that parents supporting mastery goal orientation positively influenced children's motivational level toward homework assignments" (p.

196). This idea applies to teachers as well, As educator Caitlin Tucker (2018) points out, the motivation of students towards their homework provides the key towards teachers feelings about Standards-Based Grading, “I worried that students would not do the work if it was not ‘worth something’” (p. 84). Parents attitudes towards their students affects students view of homework, which in turn affects the teachers perception of Standards-Based Instruction and Grading. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Anderman and Young (1994), students perceptions of homework are really their perceptions of educational goals and whether they are mastery oriented or performance oriented. Standards-Based Instruction and Grading at its core seeks to teach students the value of mastery over performance orientation.

According to researchers (Tucker 2018; Munoz & Guskey 2015; Spencer, 2012) Standards-Based Instruction and Grading seeks to create a culture of mastery of learning targets rather than individual performances on homework assignments. In a culture of mastery of learning processes being valued over product alone, students are taught that struggle is a part of the process. The reason for valuing process over product is described by Andermann and Young (1994) is that students who have been taught mastery oriented goals care less about the difficulty of the work and more about the process of achieving success with a particular task. School work becomes more about building a mentality of perseverance through struggle and less about accumulating points. This mentality is precisely what Standards-Based Grading reinforces. Preaching a message about mastery but grading based on final products, as is the case with traditional grading, only serves to undercut the goals of Standards-Based Grading.

Another benefit of a mastery orientation connected to homework is described by Burriss and Snead (2017). These authors argue that mastery goal oriented students place a higher value on homework and how it will affect their future success on performances such as assessments. Developing a culture of mastery therefore has short-term benefits for students on assessments in the classroom as well as long-term benefits on their lives outside of the classroom. Researchers (Anderman & Young 1994; Woolfolk, 2010) also argued that mastery oriented students place more effort and value on tasks that provide them with opportunities to demonstrate their success in multiple ways. For example, in the progress made on their homework. Ultimately Standards-Based Grading provides the flexibility needed to allow students the chance to demonstrate their learning in any means that the teacher allows. Tucker (2018) supports this idea by stating, “Practice should be customized with the goal of supporting individual students in their journeys towards mastery” (p. 84). Homework as practice is the building block working towards this goal of developing mastery oriented students.

Traditional grading systems place a greater amount of emphasis on performance orientation in which students provide one product to demonstrate their learning including how students view homework. Madjar et al. (2016) contrasts performance oriented students with mastery oriented students by arguing that these students favor competition to avoid negative comments on their product. Although the avoidance of negative comments is certainly an admirable goal, it misses the point of homework as practice and learning as mastery of content.

Similarly, Burriss and Snead (2017) argued that students with a performance mindset suffered from practices of avoidance and low persistence in the face of difficulty. If a task, such as homework, was too difficult, performance oriented students were more likely than mastery oriented students to quit. Put another way by Burriss and Snead (2017), “Performance orientation results in students choosing to engage in easier and less complex tasks instead of assuming more difficult challenges” (p. 197). These findings are not to be construed as suggesting that students with a performance orientation towards academics are failures. Barron and Harackiewicz (2003) found that students with a performance orientation were simply more likely to lose interest in a task after it is completed and scored while students with a mastery orientation carried an interest in learning beyond task completion. These characterizations of students as falling in to one bucket or the other begs the question, how can teachers move their students from performance orientation to mastery orientation? I am of the opinion that providing the proper emphasis on homework as practice provides a key to achieving that goal.

Effective homework is the beginning of the process of creating students that value mastery of learning over a single performance on homework assignments. Tucker (2018) highlights how this manifested itself in her classroom:

The more I learned about Standards-Based Grading, the more convinced I became that it would shift the focus from the accumulation of points to the quality of learning standards-based grading aligns assessments to specific standards, and the most recent assessment scores count toward a student’s grade. This approach values the development of skills over the accumulation of points. (p. 84)

Scriffny (2008) provides another example of what can happen when a teacher changes their assessment procedures especially as it relates to homework.

The author notes how “over the past three years, I have radically changed how I formally assess homework--I don't” (p. 85). Not assessing homework and treating it as a stepping stone to something greater reinforces the message of learning as a process.

While not factoring homework in final grades is important, it is also critical to communicate with students the purpose of it Scriffny (2008) when assigning homework to “. . . discuss with my students where and how it applies to their assessments. During the conversation he reminds students that the goal to “. . . get students to constantly ask themselves, ‘Do I know this? Can I do this?’ ” (p. 73). Scriffny (2008) understands that of course not all students are going to complete the necessary homework and ask themselves this question. However, Scriffny (2008) does suggest that if the purpose of homework and why it is not going to be assessed assessment is communicated properly, students understand that they are responsible for the information when it comes to demonstrating mastery on a summative assessment. The following is an example of what homework should and should not look like according to my personal experience in my room.

Suppose that the current learning target or learning objective is that *Students will be able to describe the effects of the Great Depression on the United States*. Students are given a reading with recall questions on the back that ask about various facts from the reading scored out of 10 points. Two students, A and B, receive a grade of 8 out of 10. At the outset, this grade communicates that these students both understood the learning

target equally, which may or may not be accurate. Digging deeper can reveal problems when the goal is learning target mastery.

For example, Student A answered all the questions including a short answer problem asking for the students thoughts about FDR and the New Deal, but answered two questions about dates incorrectly. Student B decided to not answer the final short answer question at all but answered everything else correctly. Is it accurate to suggest that these two students both understood the learning target equally as their grades reveal?

Not according to Marzano and Heflebower (2011) who argue that this type of grading provides very little information to the teacher about where students are struggling. Grading with single letter grades is simple yet ambiguous. It is not that the student did not complete any work, they did some of the questions. The problem is that assigning the single grade misses the fact that one student attempted to answer the summative question of the assignment while another skipped that question entirely. Without providing a distinction, these two grades are neither fair nor indicative of student achievement. Grading without context is a hallmark of traditional grading. In other words, “The thorny issue of homework is one example of how the status quo needed to change” (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 84). Homework at its best is a stepping stone to success measured by achieving mastery of the learning target. What teachers should look for in their homework is the next big question to answer.

Effective design and formative assessment of homework gives students a chance to practice and demonstrate what they have learned about a particular learning target. According to Carr (2013) effective homework in the classroom is an invaluable tool to

reinforce student learning. Researchers (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001) argue that, “When teachers assign homework to meet specific purposes and goals, more students complete their homework and benefit from the results” (p. 191). In the previous example of student A and B, a more accurate interpretation of the grades would show that one of those students missed two questions about peripheral information while another skipped a summative question altogether, yet they both earned the same number of points eight out ten.

There are several ways that the assignment could be revised to be more effective (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). One, teachers could give differing weights to questions on assignments to try and balance against this problem, elaborate more based on the previous paragraph

Two, teachers could adopt a new outlook concerning homework viewing it as a building block, a practice session before the performance that is the final assessment and not assess it. Given that final grades are intended to communicate what students have learned, Scriffny (2008) suggests that weighing in the practice, or grading it, skews this message. For example, if a teacher cannot locate where on the final assessment students will be asked about a piece of the assignment they are doing, the assignment likely falls under the umbrella of busy work. If the assignment is busy work Scriffny’s (2008) recommends the following.

One, the teacher can then reflect on whether or not the assignment should be thrown out or two, the assessment retooled to better reflect the practice that students are doing. For Scriffny’s (2008) perspective, an outcome of her new view homework is that

“since I adopted standards-based grading, my load of meaningless paperwork has been drastically reduced” (p. 74). Scriffny (2008) goes on to say that removing the busy work element of homework allows her to get the most out of each piece of paper that is given to her. Students receive focused feedback on particular work rather than generalized feedback on a collection of assignments. Adopting Scriffny’s Standards-Based Grading approach with homework can possibly lead to an issue that students will see homework that is not reflected on a summative assessment risks being viewed as simply work for work’s sake.

Bottom line is that Standards-Based Grading asks educators to reevaluate what they are asking students to do and why they are being asked to do it. Guskey (2006) supports teachers asking themselves this question because “most high school teachers indicate that grades should describe how well students have achieved the learning goals established for the course” (p. 671) and the assumption of this capstone is that homework assignments should be no different and that if not reflected in what students produce in their summative assessments then they deserve a second examination.

This section of the text described the way in which the choices educators make in constructing and implementing homework can change the nature of homework altogether. Researchers suggest that students fall broadly into two categories, performance or mastery oriented students. Performance oriented students view the product as the end of learning while mastery oriented students see learning as a long term process. Given the importance that effective homework plays in the classroom it is important that our grading procedures reflect a Mastery mindset. Standards-Based

Grading emphasizes such a mindset for students. Within the context of my school district transitioning from traditional point-based grading, homework and classwork has been one objection that staff members have put forth as an area of concern for transition. Chapter Three of this capstone will provide options and templates for future classes. The following section of this capstone will focus on the next aspect of student evaluation in the classroom, Formative assessment as feedback.

Formative Assessments as Feedback

Learning is a process and formative assessments used as feedback significantly inform best practice in a Standards-Based Instruction and Grading environment. According to Shepard (2005), formative assessments make up a significant portion of best pedagogical practice in the classroom. Formative assessment is used to differentiate instruction and inform practice. Schute (2008) differentiates formative assessment from summative assessment in that summative work provides a grade while formative work provides feedback for students and educators to evaluate and change their academic behavior. Along the road to learning there must be sign posts to help teachers and students communicate with each other and this is the most crucial. Formative assessment has the power to be this bridge between student and teacher.

Hargreaves (2005) states that the scaffolding that occurs through formative assessment has been proven to increase academic achievement. Further to the discussion of mastery oriented students, the goal of teachers is to create students that view formative assessment, and homework for that matter, as a process to be valued rather than ignored. Formative assessment, again according to Shute (2008) asks students to evaluate and

change their behavior when it comes to academic work. According to Bandura (1991), Formative assessment, when done properly, plays a significant role in developing this mindset by molding students through constant feedback and evaluation on learning target mastery.

According to (Briggs et al. 2012), there has been debates about how effective formative assessment has been for student outcomes. Just as with any reform in the classroom, there must be a careful reflection on effectiveness of practice. When it comes to formative assessment, the key is in what type of response teachers are asking our students to produce. Shute (2008) describes effective formative assessment as being specific and elaborative, rather than general overview responses. General overview responses elicit correct or incorrect answers from students, these are often multiple choice or yes/no answers. Another view of multiple choice and yes/no question is provided by Mason and Bruning (2001) who call these “Knowledge of Response” type questions. Speaking from experience with administering hundreds of formative assessments made up of Knowledge of Response questions, these formative assessments are very quick and easy to give. Answers are either correct or incorrect.

However, Hooley and Thorpe (2017) describe effective formative assessment in this manner, “Elaborative feedback includes not only knowledge of the correct answer, but where or how to find correct responses” (p. 1217). Elaborative feedback asks students questions that require thoughtful responses as opposed to knowledge of response questions that require students to pick out correct answers from a group. Relating back to this capstone’s discussion of homework, according to Haska (1993) elaborative formative

feedback helps to create a goal oriented student that persists through times of difficulty. Formative assessment as feedback when done properly is clearly incredibly powerful, but feedback must be done effectively as well.

Effective feedback contains several specific attributes that should be followed for maximum impact. Susan Brookhart (2011), describes how effective feedback has five distinct characteristics. First, effective feedback must be given timely, “feedback needs to come while students still remember what the assignment was and why they were doing it” (p. 34). Two, effective feedback should highlight strengths, “some students do not recognize their own strengths Even if they do, it is another thing altogether to have a teacher notice them” (p. 34). Three, effective feedback focuses on work not personality. For example, “Jones [the teacher] talked about Jacob’s science report and how it could be improved, not that he was a poor student” (p. 34). Four, effective feedback is non-judgemental, “feedback almost never compares a student’s work the work of another student” (p. 34).

Finally feedback is positive, clear, and specific, “the tone of feedback, whether written or oral, should convey your confidence in the student as a learner” (p. 34). Brookhart (2011) does not suggest that her description of effective feedback suggests that advocates of traditional grading practices actively discourage feedback. However, Brookhart (2011) does highlight how the focus and emphasis of feedback is different in a Standards-Based Instruction and Grading system. For this author, traditional grading systems view all classwork as products in and of themselves while a standards based system evaluates only one end product and uses the work along the way to help develop

the whole learner. McGlynn and Kelly (2017) state that "Depending on the method you have chosen, you now have data or feedback from your students that should make each student's level of understanding clear" (p. 23). This data provides educators with a window in to current student learning which is invaluable to tailoring classroom work to the needs of students. Using this window in to learning helps to address student needs. "Molding student learning behaviors through formative assessment feedback has also been shown to increase skill level, motivation, and metacognition" (Bandura, 1991, p. 250). By emphasizing formative assessments and feedback students have the opportunity to develop and more rounded, self-sufficient learners.

This section on feedback and formative assessment does not intend to convey to the reader that traditional grading practices in any way prohibits such tools in the classroom. These methods of discovering where students are succeeding and failing have been used in the classroom at the very least since I was a child in schools in the 1990's and I am certain their history extends beyond that. What makes these subjects worthy of focus is the way they are emphasized and utilized in a Standards-Based Grading system.

Hooper and Cowell (2014) describe Standards-Based Grading as a process of mastery, not a production of a product. Formative assessment and feedback as necessary pillars of such a process of mastery. Within the context of my school districts transition, formative assessment practices have been heavily used and a great amount of data has been collected. However, the type of assessments generally use are, according to Mason and Bruning (2001), Knowledge of Response questions. These questions, as stated in this section, represent an efficient way for teachers to assess learning, but not a very effective

way to do it. Chapter Three of this capstone will provide options for teachers for methods of formative assessment that are more effective than correct/incorrect multiple choice responses. The next section of this capstone focuses on the step that follows most homework and formative assessments, Summative assessments and re-assessment.

Assessment Practices

Within my school district, assessment policies and procedures have been a focus of our transition to Standards-Based Grading. Teachers have been trying to distill their notions of what assessment should be when it comes to student learning outcomes. However, when it comes to summative assessments, challenges of validity and applicability reign. According to Stiggins (2001), Classroom teachers spend nearly half of their time with students in some manner of classroom assessment. This is understandable when considering what Ohlsen (2007) says about classroom assessments and how they serve a variety of purposes for teachers including identifying student needs, monitoring instructional effectiveness, and motivating students to do their best.

Ong and Suah (2012) put a finer point on classroom assessment saying, “conducting classroom assessment is no simple task as it embraces a broad spectrum of activities which include constructing paper and-pencil tests and performance measures, grading, interpreting test scores, communicating assessment results and using assessment results in decision-making” (p. 92). Classroom assessments can take many different forms, but they all hope to achieve the same thing, accurate representation of what students have learned. However this goal is not always realized.

According to the National Research Council (as cited in Hickey & Zuiker, 2005) some current classroom assessment policies can have the effect of undermining student learning. According to the National Research Council's work current assessment procedures can have the effect of reducing student motivation. According to Hickey and Zuiker (2005) accountability-oriented assessments have been sweeping across the country. These assessments create a competitive assessment environment that seeks to weed out poor performing students based on the product they are producing while ignoring the process that brought them there.

Hickey and Zuiker (2005) point out that ironically these accountability-oriented assessment strategies that were born out of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 had the effect of leaving behind "at risk" students. Hickey and Zuiker (2005) go on to state that the simplistic concept of using a single summative product to hold students accountable ran directly counter to accepted motivation theories of student assessment. Ohlsen (2007) states the current problems with assessment practices this way, "Broad inferences about student performance in an entire domain are made by obtaining a small sample of a student's work" (p. 5). Our current grading practices that simply highlight tests unfortunately reinforce the problem that Ohlsen states. If we highlight tests without making changes to our instructional practices in the means I have been discussing, grades lack proper context. Regarding the current state of assessment Stiggins (2001) states the need for improvement is significant because classroom assessment retains immense potential for improving student learning. Improvement regarding assessment is not the

end of the discussion, what happens when students fail despite our best efforts as educators is important.

According to Dueck (2011) reassessment policies within Standards-Based Grading revolve around the nature of accurate grades representing the most recent work that students have completed. Tucker (2018) states that “When only the most recent assessment scores appear in the gradebook, grades are an accurate reflection of a student’s current skills. This is a powerful incentive for them to do their best work on each assessment” (p. 85). Dueck (2011) describes the same in a slightly different structure, “At the beginning of any unit students should be able to answer three questions: Where are we going? Where am I? And How do I close the gap?” (p. 72). The first question is designed to prime students for learning. The other two questions attempt to create a self-awareness in students about where they fell short on their test performance and how do they create a path towards success. Dueck (2011) goes on to say, “Students must have answers for these questions if they are hoping for a second chance to demonstrate their knowledge” (p. 74).

To some, this may seem to create a system in which students just simply have another chance to guess “B” if they guessed “A” the first time. However when there is a concerted effort to create authentic learning opportunities for students outside of the multiple choice format not only does the educator provide a second chance at the summative performance, they are providing true differentiated learning for their students. This process does require teachers to reexamine their retesting procedures, “I believed I

could administer retests using my existing test structure. It turned out to be more complicated” (Dueck, 2011, p. 73).

Creating new exams for students may be a daunting task for some, but according to Dueck (2011) creating retesting opportunities for the specific content that students struggled with benefits both high and low-achieving students (p. 75). Dueck (2011) goes on to say that Targeted reassessment for all students lowers stress, increases accuracy, and opens opportunities to close the achievement gap within cohorts of students while creating a culture of resilience and independence in the classroom. (p. 75). Kallick and Zmuda (2017) agree with this idea by stating that if young people complete their schooling still dependent on others to tell them when they are adequate, good, or excellent, then we have missed the whole point of what education is about. To highlight this point, Corno (1993) puts it this way, “To become self-regulating the learner must assume control over their own learning, using strategies to lead them toward personalized learning goals” (p. 338).

Assessment in the classroom can be a confusing and controversial subject. Within the context of my school districts transition away from traditional grading, assessment practices are already fairly set in stone in the content areas. However, as Wiggins (1992) argues, effective testing strategies are more complex than the simple multiple choice tests that dominate the testing landscape, they should be a performance of ability. Wiggins (1992) goes on to say, “Performance is not just doing simplistic tasks that cue us for a desired bit of knowledge” (p. 28). In Chapter Three of this capstone practical options for my school district will be explained for what performance can look like within the

content areas. The next section of this capstone discusses how the grades we report can help or hurt our purpose as teachers.

Grade Reporting

In general, one of the final interactions between student and teacher is the reporting of grades. This subject is central to the discussion at my school district when it comes to a Standards-Based Instruction and Grading transition. Munoz and Guskey (2015) agree that students should be given a set of standards to identify what students know. However, despite this level of agreement “few states have developed a well-aligned and effective standards-based reporting forms the overcome multiple design and implementation issues” (p. 66). Guskey (2015) goes on to say that grade reports should be based on a broad body of evidence that summarizes student learning in a timely, accurate, and useful manner. This section of the capstone will examine what challenges confront reforming the grade reporting systems currently in use.

As discussed earlier in this paper, Hooper and Cowell (2014) argue that the purpose of grading is to communicate achievement on accepted standards and learning outcomes. Failing to accurately communicate what grades are intended to mean when it comes to parents risks the rejection of Standards-Based Grading as worth while. According to Guskey (2004) adjusting the curriculum to mirror the standards students are assessed on is a relatively straightforward task. However, Guskey (2004) also states that the challenge of communicating a change to grade reporting is both daunting and critical at the same time.

Guskey (2004) states that currently there is a gap between what teachers are communicating to parents through report cards and what parents are interpreting.

Wiggins (1996) places the challenge on the teacher in this way:

Grades or numbers, like all symbols, offer efficient ways of summarizing. Since the parent cannot be expected to wade through all the student's work and draw all apt meanings, the educator's job is to make meaning of the performances and to present facts, judgments, diagnoses, and prescriptions in a concise, user-friendly form. (p. 141)

Considering the challenge of communication, the place to begin, according to Guskey (2004), is with the language teachers use when grades are reported.

Guskey (2004) cites informal research he conducted to discover what language teachers are using when it comes to their standards based report cards. Guskey then grouped them into common categories as seen in the recreation of his table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher Language to Describe Indicators of Student Performance

1. Levels of Understanding/Quality			
Modest	Beginning	Novice	
Intermediate	Progressing	Apprentice	
Proficient	Adequate	Proficient	
Superior	Exemplary	Distinguished	
2. Levels of Mastery/Proficiency			
Below Basic	Below Standard		
Basic	Approaching Standard		
Proficient	Meets Standard		
Advanced	Exceeds Standard		
3. Frequency of Display			
Rarely	Never		
Occasionally	Seldom		
Frequently	Usually		
Consistently	Always		
4. Degree of Effectiveness			
Ineffective	Moderately Effective	Pre-Emergent	Limited
Poor	Highly Effective	Emerging	Partial
Acceptable	Excellent	Acquiring	Thorough
Unsatisfactory	Needs Improvement	Extending	
Satisfactory	Outstanding	Incomplete	
5. Evidence of Accomplishment			
Little or No Evidence			
Partial Evidence			
Sufficient Evidence			
Extensive Evidence			

These words represent a variety of teacher interpretations of where students were performing based on the learning targets that they were expected to master. As Guskey (2004) goes on to say, although it may be clear to teachers what these labels are intended

to convey, parents were largely left in the dark. Guskey (2004) explained that “We found that parents generally interpreted labels based on their personal experiences with grading and reporting” (p. 327). If a parent happened to have experience in a classroom or a job that provided performance reviews using such language (Table 1), they had a much better chance of understanding what was being communicated. However, if a parent lacked that experience, according to Guskey (2004) they were likely to view these marks as representing where student stood in comparison to others, likely born from their own educational experiences.

Guskey and Munoz (2015) offer another option for teachers to recreate their gradebooks to represent a more holistic approach to student achievement. They suggest that breaking grade reporting in to separate units for product, process, and progress can serve to better evaluate the students for mastery.

Product grades. Product grades provide students with scores on the assignments that they have completed. Guskey and Munoz (2015) state that in general these grades represent summative work at the end of units or learning targets. According to O’Connor (2002) product grades are favored by educators who believe grading’s primary purpose is communication summative evaluations of student achievement and performance. There are many options for what are used to demonstrate product grades such as projects, papers, exhibits. But the end goal is the same, product grades demonstrate the product that students have been working towards throughout the learning targets or units.

Process grades. Process grades are intended to highlight the learning process throughout all stages of development. Tucker (2018) suggests that students master

content at different rates. Process grades help students see the value of the journey that a class grade represents, “Educators who believe in process grades recognize that product grades do not provide a complete picture of student learning” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 65). Grades can and should represent the summative performance and the formative work that students go through to get to mastery of learning targets. These grades can be represented using quizzes, formative assessments, participation.

Progress grades. Progress grades represent an indication of growth. “Progress grades are used by educators that believe the most important aspect of grading is how much students gain from their learning experiences” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 65). In other words the process is just as important if not more so than the final product. Accomplishment is not just an end in an of itself, it is a process to be valued.

Guskey and Bailey (2010) suggest that this road map should be used to clearly distinguish between product, process, and progress grades. The goal of any educator worth their salt should be to accurately communicate to students the level of academic achievement they are currently performing at. One way to do that was emphasized by Munoz and Guskey (2015) suggest that breaking down grades in to their separate components as a method that some educators are using to report the performance of students. “By providing more than a single letter grade for students, educators can provide a more comprehensive view of what students are capable of in school” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 66). This point is key, grading is not only about providing the cherry on top of a job well done, it should also be about communicating where a student is at and what they are currently capable of. Although this type of multiple grade reporting scheme

seems as though it will be a great deal more work, it is ultimately more accurate than the traditional methods currently in use. When relating back to the purpose of grading, the extra work is worth the effort.

Summary and Rationale

Grading practices are often closely held personal beliefs that represent the individual values of the teachers that are giving them. Asking teachers, new or veteran, to examine their grading practices can put educators in a defensive mode about their practices. According to Marzano (2000) “The current grading system in America is over a century old and lacks a body of supporting research” (p. 5). I believe this is the reason that traditional grading methods can and should be reviewed. Most grading habits are born out of nothing but tradition and habit. To adapt to the many needs of students today, grading methods themselves need to be challenged and examined.

Questions must be posed about how and why we grade what we grade and what does it communicate to students and parents. Traditional grades have trained students to chase after points rather than to chase after knowledge and skills. A transition to Standards-Based Grading offers a chance to clarify what we ask students to do and what we communicate to them as learners. This section discussed the purpose of grading, which sets the stage for any discussion of grading reform. The proper use of homework and formative assessment as stepping stones towards learning target mastery was also discussed.

Finally, a section about how to report grades in a standards based system so as to ensure that the message of learning target mastery is effectively communicated to the

relevant parties was discussed as the primary area of struggle for those exploring a change in grading practices. The literature was rich when it came to issues of preparing students for examinations, however there was a lack of discussion as to how to communicate these fundamental changes to students, parents, and staff which will be the basis for my project moving forward.

CHAPTER THREE

Bridging the Gap

Project Overview

My research process concerning the transition from traditional grading to Standards-Based Instruction and Grading has been years in the making. Chapter One of this capstone focused on the reasons that I am passionate about answering my research question, *how can Standards-Based Instruction and Grading be successfully implemented in secondary schools?* During my first teaching job in a first ring suburban school district in a major metropolitan area in the upper midwest I witnessed first hand many teachers grappling with the idea of how can we change our practice to better serve our students. Progress on this front has been slow and difficult in my school district. Many teachers have expressed frustration about the idea of adjusting the way their classes are run while others are searching for the right path forward. Chapter two of my capstone examined the literature surrounding Standards-Based Grading reform. Chapter three of this capstone represents not only my contribution to the academic field of grading and instructional practices, but also my contribution to the continuing struggle that my school district has been going through in an attempt to better address student needs. This chapter will

outline the practical steps that should be taken to successfully implement grading reform in the secondary schools.

In Chapter Three of this capstone project I will outline the parameters of my proposed project to aid in the implementation of Standards-Based Grading while building on the current research surrounding grading methods. My project is based out of a lengthy literature review that identifies areas of Standards-Based Grading transitions that could use more support. My aim is to not only provide practical support for any teachers that are seeking to reform their grading methods within my school district but outside of my school district as well. Next I will describe the project in greater detail.

Project Description

This project is formed of three artifacts representing the three groups that are most affected by grading reform: Parents, students, and staff. The intent of this project is to provide usable resources for these groups to help aid in the transition to an instruction and grading methods that may not be something they are knowledgeable of.

The artifact for parents consist of a mailable flyer that discusses the change they can expect to see in their students grading. The purpose of this artifact is an attempt to reduce the confusing that is undoubtedly going to arise out of changing the way in which grades are represented and reported. Parents and guardians, despite their best efforts, are just as guilty of misunderstanding the grades that their children are receiving as students are. Parents and guardians have a right to understand these grading techniques in the best way possible. This artifact will be only one page and therefore cannot communicate all aspects of grading reform. The artifact will have highlights as to what to expect as well as

an example Standards-Based Grading reporting form. Dates will also be listed for forums between teachers and parents to explain what this grading transition will look like in individual classrooms. The work of Thomas Guskey (2004) and Kyle Spencer (2012) on Standards-Based Grading reporting will provide a starting point for this artifact.

The second artifact will be for students. This will be a google slide presentation with presenter notes that explains to students how grading and instruction will be changing in their classrooms. The idea is that this artifact will be presented to students during the first week of school. The artifact will initially present the highlights and reasoning behind Standards-Based Grading, this part will be presented first. In the following weeks students will be shown a content specific example of how grading will be done. For example, students will see in their science classes how their assignments are going to be reported and how to interpret them. The idea here is to space out the information and give it to them when they need to know it. If students are presented with all the information at one time it is more likely that some will miss information that is critical for their understanding of their grading marks. This argument follows the exhaustive body of research concerning the “Forgetting Curve” (Bean, 1912).

The final artifact will be for teachers. This will be an outline for a professional development day for staff to first meet as a whole group to discuss grading and instructional changes that are coming to their classrooms. The first day is to provide the theoretical framework the the school district is going to be working in concerning Standards-Based Grading. The school district has already done a great deal of work to ensure that classrooms are all using learning targets to frame their content work and

therefore I do not anticipate a large amount of push back on that concept. The theoretical framework will center around the grading work of Tom Schimmer (2016) which outlines practical grading reform methods that can be used in the classroom. The second day of professional development may provide a greater deal of pushback from staff.

The second day of professional development will center around Collaborative Team (CT) work. In other settings this may be referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), for our purposes these are the same. The grade level and content groups will meet to discuss their current curriculum. They will then be presented with the rationale and method for how to adjust their current practice towards a Standards-Based Grading system. Examples from area schools will be shown to them of how the content areas have adjust their reporting systems and instructional methods to maximize the impact that Standards-Based Grading can have on accurate and fair grades.

Setting and Audience

The setting and audience for this project in the immediate short term is Parents/Guardians, students, and staff in a first ring suburban school district in a major metropolitan area in the upper midwest. This is a public school district that covers a large area in the northwest suburbs and rural areas near a major metropolitan area city in the upper midwest. The school district serves 13 communities with approximately 250,000 residents. The school district is by far the largest school district in the state and one of the largest in the country. The district consists of: five high schools, six middle schools, 26 elementary schools, as well as alternative learning settings for the high school and middle school levels. The district offers several magnet schools including: CEMS (Chemistry,

Engineering, Math, Science), STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math) and Biomedical emphasis.

Established in 1952, this school district originally served a student body of 4000 students K-12. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the student body population will have grown to nearly 40,000 students. As of 2019, the student population breaks down as 31.75% non-white and 68.25%. The non-white population breaks down as follows: 12.01% Black, 7.9% Asian, 5.86% Hispanic, and 68% Native American. Demographic data provided by the school district shows that the non-white population has risen from 20% to 31.75% in the last ten years. According to district data the student body includes 34% free and reduced lunch recipients. The specific school in which this project will be first implemented in a middle school. This setting largely mirrors the districts numbers as far as the white and non-white population. The school's population numbers rose slightly during the 2018-2019 school year to 1,172 students.

The intended audience for this project are parents, students, and staff. These groups were chosen because they are the groups most affected by any type of change to grading practices and procedures. Parents need an opportunity to be informed about the changes that they are going to be seeing in their child's grade reports. This artifact will provide sample grading procedures and how to interpret the artifact they receive. I am consulting with our community outreach department for this project to see what languages should be represented and how they should be translated.

Timeline

This section will discuss the proposed timeline for implementing this project. Creation of the project will be completed by July 2019. The goal is to have this project prepared for implementation during workshop week for the 2019-2020 school year. I will be completing this project during the Capstone 8490 course at Hamline University during the summer of 2019. The first year of implementation will be focused on feedback from staff, students, and parents. A review process of the feedback provided will take place during the planned staff grading day at the end of trimester one. At this time adjustments will be made to the artifacts for students and parents and reintroduced at the beginning of trimester two. Throughout the first year of implementation the cycle of feedback and adjustments will continue until the following year. Workshop week 2020 will be the second implementation year for this project with all edits and adjustments.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflections

Introduction

This project, in furtherance of completion of a Masters of Arts in Teaching degree, sought out to answer the research question *how can Standards-Based Grading be successfully implemented in secondary settings*. My motivation for pursuing this question is rooted in my experience working with students for the past ten years. Grading and communication regarding student achievement?students has been muddled at best and outright misleading at worst. This project sought to replace traditional grading techniques lacking research to support their efficacy with grading techniques that are firmly planted in data driven practices. Standards-Based Grading and Standards Based Instruction deserve serious consideration as replacement grading schemes in secondary classrooms. This project seeks to provide a roadmap for school districts to follow in their journey.

Throughout the research process I discovered the roots of grading reform trace back decades. Standards-Based Grading and Standards Based Instruction represent a holistic approach to grading reform and should be viewed not as a radical change to education, but rather as placing best teaching practice within its proper grading context.

According to Robert Marzano, traditional grading processes lack any basis in research and are simply used because they are comfortable (2011). As a student, traditional grading methods made sense to me, they were clean and easy to understand. But if I were asked to tell you how much I knew about the subjects I was being taught, I would have been lost. As an educator, this pointed me to the true problem of practice. There is a disconnect between what students are hearing and what we want them to hear.

Standards-Based Instruction and Grading is an honest effort to address these problems of practice.

Revisiting the Literature

A review of the current literature on grading reform points to a strong consensus that change is warranted, but little consensus as to how to move forward. In order to facilitate a discussion of realistic steps forward in this process, my paper was organized in the manner that teachers would find practical in within typical classroom instruction: homework/classwork, formative assessment, summative assessment, and grade reporting. A review of the literature in each of these sections points to their importance in an effective classrooms. Several elements of my literature review stood out to me as consequential for standards-based grading reform. Specifically, the implications of effective homework/classwork practices and motivation theory were particularly illuminating for me and my work as an educator.

Homework/classwork is one area of practice that has long reaching implications for teachers. According to Redding (2000), effective homework practices have the ability to overcome significant achievement gaps in student populations. According to this

research, homework that is relevant and obviously connected to student learning targets as well as assessment is defined as effective. It is not a mystery as to why; homework is treated as a chance to authentically practice what students are learning. This is not to suggest that traditional grading practices imply that homework is not important, rather that Standards-Based Instruction highlights and emphasizes the use of effective homework. Throughout my research as well as my time as a student, the problem of practice with ineffective homework is that it is sometimes treated as busy work or grade padding. Within a system of Standards-Based Instruction and Grading, effective homework as practice is a vital and prized component of instruction. Effective homework, according to my research and review of the work of Tammy Heflebower, is work that is connected through a unit from its beginning to its end. Herein lies the possible solution for attacking problems such as the achievement gap, revitalizing our work from the bottom up and ensuring that the grade padding and the busy work is left behind where it belongs. This aspect of my research was front and center during the creation of my project as well as the next piece regarding student motivation.

Researchers Buriss and Snead (2017) argued that students generally fall into two categories when it comes to motivation: performance oriented students and mastery oriented students. Performance oriented students live and die on the test. What is important to them is the performance at the end, what happens before that is largely unimportant. When confronted with a challenge of endurance and perseverance, they lack the motivation to see a task to its completion because their focus is on the end not the road that gets you there. Homework, classwork, the general process that we as educators

want students to go through is not important to this type of student. This does not mean that they are always our A students, this student may also be our, “I’ll just do the retake” student. Contrast that type of student with a mastery oriented student. This type of student pushes through the routine challenges they encounter. The struggle is part of the process. These students embody Carol Dweck’s “growth mindset”. A problem is not the end of the line for these kids, it is simply the next hurdle to get over.

Implications

These two ideas, the importance of practice as well as student motivation, stuck out to me because they are intimately related. Practice and performance must be in sync for them to become effective. Standards Based Instruction and Grading force educators to look at their current practices and to ask themselves the question, “What do my students know at the end of my class?” Traditional grading practices do a wonderful job of telling us how much students have done in our rooms, but a very poor job of telling us how much do students know. They lack context to tell a full story. Thinking back to the two types of student that Buriss and Snead (2017) described, performance or mastery, in a traditional grading system the performance oriented student that struggles is going to be on an island when it comes to locating the root of the problem. Shifting that student’s mindset to a mastery mindset requires educators to emphasize the importance of the process as a building block to success. This has far reaching implications for that student outside of the classroom and it was a focus of my project.

Limitations and Challenges

There were several limitations to my project. What I have created is a one day professional development as well as accompanying communications to students and parents. The shift from traditional grading practices towards a standards-based system will require a timeline of years not months. I would argue that in order to be effective, a Standards-Based Instruction and Grading implementation process should take three to five years to successfully implement with at least two yearly professional developments to aid staff. As far as using my project as a model for implementation, another limitation is that I am not operating within a vacuum. My current school district is three years into this transition effort. Therefore my project would be most successfully used in the middle of any implementation effort. Transitioning slowly and methodically is of paramount importance. Creating the culture and buy in from staff first, regardless of how long it takes will make the transition effort overall more successful.

Further Considerations

As to related effort, throughout the development process of my project I worked closely with other professionals who have been working in my school district on this process from the beginning. In order to fill in the preceding elements of successful implementation prior to my project, school districts should follow this road map. First, develop a coherent mission statement for staff that represents the values of growth mindset. In short, these values teach us that student's intelligence and ability is malleable and can be developed. It states that through a mindset of overcoming challenges rather than giving up will help develop the skills that students need to be successful. Spending

the requisite time at the front end with staff on this mindset will prepare them for my presentation.

The second area that should be explored prior to or concurrently with my presentation would be the development of course syllabi that reflect common language between departments concerning Standards-Based Instruction and Grading. By developing a common language and wording, school districts have a better chance of communicating the goals of this movement to parents and students.

Final Words

It has been said to me that Standards-Based Instruction and Grading represents a race to the bottom where educators cater to the lowest performing student to get them to cross an invisible threshold of mastery. I could not disagree more. This grading and instruction movement is not about ignoring one quartile of students for another. It is about challenging the status quo because where we are now is neither fair nor accurate to the students we work with. Traditional grading is simple and easy for the educator, but of course that is not the point. Our traditional grading schemes have developed a mindset in students that emphasizes the accumulation of points rather than the mastery of content. Standards Based Instruction and Grading seeks to accurately communicate to students the places where they are succeeding and the places they are not yet succeeding. But above all, this movement seeks to create in students the mindset that they can succeed in anything they attempt with enough practice and work.

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