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Standards-Based Grading Made My Kid Average

By Peter DeWitt on March 14, 2017 7:05 AM

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Today's guest post is written by frequent Finding Common Ground blogger Lisa Westman. Lisa is an instructional coach specializing in differentiation for Skokie School District 73.5 in suburban Chicago. She taught middle school gifted humanities, ELA, and SS for twelve years before becoming a coach.

Recently a friend called me in a panic. She was beside herself because she had just received her seventh grade daughter's new standards-based report card. My friend relayed that her daughter (who was formerly an "A" student) was now "just average" according to the new report card.

I asked my friend if the report card had the word "average" on it and my friend said, "no." She elaborated that her daughter had received all "meets" and no "exceeds" on her report card, and, therefore, her daughter was now, "just average."

I calmly responded that "meets standards" does not equate to average. I clarified that a standards-based grading system does not neatly align to the traditional grading system we experienced in our schooling. I explained that standards-based grading is a much more pragmatic and informative way of reporting student progress than the traditional A-F approach.

I expected my friend to accept this explanation and settle down, but instead, her emotions escalated, and she replied, "well, my daughter's teacher thinks standards-based grading is stupid, too."

"We are the stories we tell ourselves." Joan Didion

Many school districts that have made the switch to standards-based reporting have been met with reactions like the one illustrated above. And, although I was surprised by my friend's response, I shouldn't have been. Reactions like hers are to be expected when identities are threatened, and eliminating traditional grading practices poses a threat to many people's identities.

How so?

The A-F/100-point traditional grading system has been in place since the early twentieth century. This means all parents and grandparents of students currently in kindergarten through 12th grade, plus the vast majority of today's teachers experienced school with a traditional grading system.

Based on the grades we received as students, we told ourselves we were "good" or "bad" students. We used our grades to tell ourselves which subjects we were "smart" in and which ones we weren't. We used our grades to compare ourselves to our peers. Our parents used our grades to compare us to their peers and their peers' children. We used our grades to determine if we were cut-out for certain careers. We allowed grades to tell us many stories about who we were. For better or for worse, these stories have played a part in shaping our identities as adults. Therefore, when we remove a critical piece of our identity formation (traditional grades) we may, consciously or not, feel threatened.

So, now what?

We will be uncomfortable for a little while. Ultimately, just like us, our children's identities will be shaped, in part, by the educational experience they have. However, if implemented correctly (as extensively researched and reported about by **Thomas Gusky** and **Rick Wormeli**) standards-based reporting should allow students to identify as individual learners, rather than comparably "good" or "bad" students.

The concept of standards-based grading is not easily enacted by teachers, nor is it easily understood by parents. Rather, this change is a work in progress which requires both educators and parents to work together to relearn what we have been taught in the past about grades.

While this shift is difficult for both educators and parents, it is the educators who must lead the charge, and be the first to relearn (**watch this video for some inspiration on relearning**). The way in which educators share information about standards-based grading with parents is crucial for successful implementation. If educators are positive, admit that change is hard, and stick with the change because it is in the best interest of students, parents will follow suit. However, if educators protest, criticize, or are ambivalent about the benefits of standards-based

interest of students, parents will react similarly. Educators must model the reaction they hope to elicit from parents and students.

To effectively communicate with parents, educators must put to rest some of the widely-held fallacies about grading like the three listed below:

Fallacy #1: Parents need letter grades to understand their child's performance.

Reality: Traditional grades give the facade of understanding because they use familiar words and measures. Consider a report card that lists: Math: A, Reading: B+. Parents understand the words math and reading. They understand that an A is the highest grade and a B is close to an A. But, the reality is, this communication does not actually tell parents anything about what was learned. Math and reading are too broad of categories to offer any insight and the letter grades could mean a variety of things, many of which have nothing to do with reading or math.

Now what? Standards-based grading is an opportunity to create a common understanding of exactly what is being assessed. When teachers take care to ensure assessments are appropriately aligned to the standards they are assessing, the assessments become a vehicle for dialogue between students, parents, and teachers to adequately discuss where students are in their learning progression and where they are going.

Fallacy #2: Letter grades are more objective.

Reality: Once again, an A-F system creates a facade of objectivity. Using a percentage attached to a letter (93% = A) feels objective. But, what isn't necessarily objective are the tools used to garner those scores. When I taught English, I often struggled to determine the critical difference between an 89% and a 90% on a student's narrative writing assignment. When I taught social studies, I assumed the multiple choice tests I created were completely objective due to the right/wrong nature of the questions. I didn't consider, however, the inherent bias of the questions since I had written them.

Now what? There is a reason teachers are part of a PLC/team and there are reasons why these teams are encouraged to meet frequently. This is a time for teachers to discuss topics like objectivity. It is no longer frowned upon for educators to admit that learning is not an entirely empirical process. Learning is complex and, therefore, grading is complex, too. When we look at student work as a team, engage in dialogue about assessments, and come to a consensus as to what "meeting standards" is, we are making the reporting process as objective as possible.

Fallacy #3: By the time we shift to standards-based grading, there will be a new fad, and we will have to start all over again.

Reality: It will take time for individual school systems and the educational system as a whole to fully embrace this change. It is likely that once we become comfortable with this change, there will be additional amendments to the way we grade. But, such is life. This is part of what all successful industries do to stay relevant. They makes changes to improve processes, gather new information, and make more changes to improve processes again.

Next Steps: Don't lament about the process. Don't worry about what the future holds. We are doing what is best for students with the information we have right now. Celebrate the progressive and long overdue steps we are taking to use grading as an indicator of learning rather than symbol of finality.

Questions about this post? Connect with Lisa on Twitter.

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 Rochester SAGE · 4 months ago
Lisa,

My concern with standards-based reporting is that it will lead to more ignoring of students who are ahead of grade level. A principal likely would not say to a teacher "I want all of your students to have Bs or higher!", but the principal, district, or legislature might demand all students not "meet standards" and assess teachers based on the percent that meet standards.

students get "meets standards" and assess teachers based on the percent that meet standards.

What about the students who enter the grade with most or all of "meets standards"? The teachers now have more incentive to ignore the growth for those students in favor of proficiency for all students. We saw this happen with NCLB, which devastated gifted education and differentiation for gifted learners.

Unless the standards-based education has a succession of standards that students move to once successful in that standard, such as moving to subtraction once achieving "meets standards" in addition, my concern is that it would trap gifted students even more into being stuck at grade level than the current A-F system does.

You've taught gifted students. Can you convince me otherwise?

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Doug Stein → Rochester SAGE · 4 months ago

In a previous life, I taught gifted students (and am still one myself). The grading system isn't the major barrier preventing gifted students from flourish within heterogeneous classrooms - it's the bracketing of standards by grade level and the lack of competency-based personalized learning models.

When each student can go deep - either for advancement beyond the current grade level or remediation prior to the current grade level - the process conforms the standards to the student rather than the student to the standards.

Put another way - if we reported by showing where students are on a journey to competence (and excellence) across all standards across the whole K-12 range instead of narrowly focusing on the subset of standards that bureaucrats determined to be appropriate for a single grade (age range) at a time, we'd have a complete map of growth and not just a checklist for a single grade.

Imagine a report card that spans the entire K-12 period - a connected graph of concepts (standards) and their prerequisites and subsequent learning opportunities. Imagine it as an animation showing time-based evidence of competency and mastery. Imagine it as a flow of colored inks running through a line drawing of a graph of learning. You would see the struggles (stubborn spots where the ink isn't flowing) and the areas of great growth (where the ink flows and changes color rapidly).

Standard-based grading isn't a problem for gifted students (or any student) as long as we're more inventive in permitting students to learn and achieve "off-grade-level" and more inventive in communicating and reporting consistent with a dynamic growth mindset

[see more](#)

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Rochester SAGE → Rochester SAGE · 4 months ago

Doug,

I completely agree. In an email to Lisa, I suggested a system where grading is based more on the number of NEW standards met, instead of the number of standards met for the current grade. Enter the grade level way behind but complete a higher number of standards than average, that is an A. Enter way ahead but complete fewer standards than average, that is a low grade, even if proficiency is met. If top students are receiving Ds, there will be a clarion call for growth-based education reform. (And think of the encouragement if struggling students can now earn As!)

I agree that standards-based education can help gifted learners, but only if it is structured correctly. If it remains proficiency-based, as is our current system, it will harm gifted children as much as NCLB did.

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Matt · 4 months ago

I also struggle with standards-based grading. In my experience, the standards become items to check off a list once we feel students have met expectations. The unfortunate part of it is that standards are the minimum for what we should expect of students. Is this worth throwing parents into confusion? I've never heard of a school make great strides with their students as a whole by employing standards-based grading. Focusing on literacy, curriculum, and instruction has a much better track record.

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dflier · 4 months ago

I'm not sure I'm entirely sold on standards based grading either, but here's one immediate benefit: kids and parents will stop seeing grades as rewards that have actual value.

I constantly tell my high school students to worry about mastering content and skills. Do NOT worry about increasing a grade. Points are useless. Skills last a lifetime.

If they studied content and practiced skills rather than spending their days obsessing over grades, well, then....isn't that the real aim of education?

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Fingers · 4 months ago

Nlce article Lisa! This is going to be a generations-long slog to get people out of the A-F mentality. However I take issue with your characterization of it as relearning. It's more learning a new approach with different methods and goals, rather than learning how to do "the same thing" after a pause. This probably is more akin to the "functional fixedness" or other schema-based cognitive biases where we get stuck in previously used solutions or ways of using particular tools to solve new problems. When all you know is a hammer, we tend to think of solving those problems by banging or prying. I'm glad school districts have begun to embrace standards-based grading - then you find these states trying to grade schools A-F, a trend that that with any hope is also waning.

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judy W · 4 months ago

I have been using a standards-based grading system for over ten years now. Having a growth mindset would help everyone get over the need for an A. With a growth mindset, it is all about the learning process, accepting the challenges with delight, and enjoying the productive struggle in problem-solving. Raising students with grit benefits them now and as lifelong learners. We can start by first changing our mindsets as parents and fostering a growth mindset through children's picture books. Read-alouds like Growing Smarter will introduce young children to such aspects of a growth mindset as perseverance, effort, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. This book even explains how the brain is like a muscle that gets stronger (and smarter) when learning occurs. Let's all give our children the gift of a growth mindset by not getting hung up on grades!

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NH Teacher · 4 months ago

Lisa,

Thank you for sharing your thoughtful article. I'm curious about any evidence colleges and universities (especially competitive ones) have provided about "translating the equivalency" of standards based grades as kids prepare and apply to colleges? Are prospective students at an "advantage" or "disadvantage"?

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different learner · 4 months ago

As a dyslexic student who learned beyond any doubt that he was a bad student and a bad learner before I was 10 I find concerns about discouraging "A" learners a bit narrow.

I have no idea if a new system of grading will help but as someone who works with struggling learners I know the A-F system is deeply toxic and loaded with unintended fallout for teachers and learners.

Just a little recognition of the damage our grading system inflicts on children, both the "good" and "bad" learners would be refreshing.

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nora kriegler · 4 months ago

Question: Is standards-based grading only based on test scores of standardized tests? If so, we have narrowed down what we look at to determine if a child is doing well in school.

We need to also promote a curriculum that develops students' interests and includes projects where children demonstrate the use of skills. The use of projects and an inquiry-based program will provide us a fuller "picture" of how each child is doing - including the soft skills that we now know influence success in the real world. Doing this does not discount the skills that children are supposed to master and that reflect the standards. It just broadens how we look at each child's progress and growth to include the "whole child". This will help everyone understand a child's progress: parents, teachers, and school officials. It will also provide a path to promoting higher achievement for each child.

I cannot believe that words such as average or above average are being used to describe how students or to what level students have met standards. There are much better terms and those terms need to be defined so that parents and everyone who looks at these ratings understands what they mean.

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TCliff · 4 months ago

As a former middle school teacher back in the 1990's, our school tried to use something similar....we called it DPAN...Distinguished, Proficient, Apprentice and Novice. We wanted our students and parents to begin looking at learning as being on a continuum upon which students could continually move up. In each subject, it was made very clear what was required to earn each distinction. Few people would reach Distinguished, the goal was to get everyone to Proficient. Kids caught on right away and loved it. Parents struggled. Even though it

reach distinguished, the goal was to get everyone to proficient. Kids caught on right away and loved it. Parents struggled. Even though it gave them very specific information about what their child was able to do and not do as well, and what they could/needed to do to move up, they insisted that A-F was better. This is even though an A in one class has no comparison to an A in another, and if that A was based mostly on effort and good behavior or was it based only on test scores. After 2 years we got a new principal and had to drop it.

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Michele B · 4 months ago

As a parent, I want to know if my children are working to the best of their ability. I trust my children's teachers to be teaching the standards. My average children, ALWAYS met the standard being assessed during elementary school. Their transition to middle school, and a traditional grading system, has been made more difficult because they learned throughout elementary school to "meet" the standard.

Also, I am an educated high school math teacher, but reading the standard based report card was an exercise in comprehending educational lingo. I cannot imagine how it feels for a less educated parent, or a parent who did not go through the US education system, to be presented with approximately 40 standards from 7-8 different academic disciplines.

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deborahm → Michele B · 3 months ago

Hi Michele. As a parent who wasn't educated in the US, I hear your concern about finding the language of Standards complicated for many parents and students. As a teacher and coach, I can share a method that has worked where I work: we take all of the K-12 standards that will be assessed at each grade level, and translate them into what should be more kid-friendly Learning Targets. These standard-aligned Learning Targets are what appear on progress reports, report cards, the online grading system, and what students use in formal and informal opportunities for goal-setting. Depending on the complexity involved in mastery, a single standard may be broken down into multiple Learning Targets, each assessed independently.

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helen.hoffman · 4 months ago

This is a very sensible approach to concerns about standards-based grading. But I wonder, do we have stop and just accept it as it is until more get comfortable with it? I wonder whether we shouldn't keep on improving it, partially in response to concerns. Meets Standards may not be an entirely adequate label. It doesn't tell the parent or student a whole lot either--even if more than a grade label. I'm thinking we might discover more descriptive labels to give our kids that are specific to their particular achievements, and that show how and where they are meeting standards or not. I explore this idea further in <http://empoweringplcs.edublogs.org/2017/03/14/if-we-must-gradelets-use-grades-to-inform-not-label/>

Helen Hoffman

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Learning in Mind · 4 months ago

Standards-based grading is based on one-size-fits-all standardization (know and be able to do ABC at the age of 6 and MNO at the age of 10). PLEASE read Todd Rose's book The End of Average to better understand why standards are the worst thing that has ever happened to public education. There is no such thing as a standard person, making the "norm" against which everyone is measured a fantasy.

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dr. c · 4 months ago

I agree there is some merit to the standards grading process. However, when one thinks of high school and a transcripts, which student has the advantage for college admission and scholarships. Many are based on GPA's and the grades kids earn in each subject. Until all high schools use the same format the kids getting a standard based report card and transcript are at a distinct disadvantage.

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