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# Considering Standards-based Grading: Challenges for Secondary School Leaders

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# Considering Standards-based Grading: Challenges for Secondary School Leaders

Matt Townsley, *University of Northern Iowa*

**Abstract:** Rather than awarding points for a combination of worksheet completion, quiz performance, in-class participation, and essay writing, standards-based grading separates academics from non-academic factors and communicates students' progress towards mastery of course or grade-level standards. Some secondary schools are moving towards standards-based grading (SBG) in an attempt to produce more consistent grading practices, however the empirical evidence resulting from this change is mixed. The purpose of this article is to describe principles of standards-based grading, empirical support of SBG, and several common challenges secondary school leaders may face when considering this philosophical shift. Future research recommendations include exploring the perspectives of college students who graduate from high schools using SBG to understand the longer-term successes and shortcomings of the grading system.

**Keywords:** standards-based grading, classroom assessment, school leadership

Letter grades have been a misnomer for student learning for over a century (Brookhart et al., 2016). With such deep historical roots, Jeffrey Erickson (2010), a high school principal with experience leading grading reform and author of several articles on the topic, calls grading the "third rail" of education. While one teacher may award extra credit for bringing a box of tissues to class and emphasize homework completion, a colleague down the hall may not offer any extra credit and strongly emphasize test scores in the final grade calculation. This is problematic for school leaders. When parents contact high school principals to inquire how their children can improve academically, responses vary remarkably depending upon administrator knowledge of grading practices

and the criteria used to calculate the grade. Evidence suggests grading is an unmistakably subjective aspect of public schooling (Brimi, 2011; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2013; Starch & Elliott, 1912).

The purpose of classroom grading has been described as complex and often incompatible with learning (Guskey & Jung, 2012; Kunnath, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). One major reason is because traditional practices often include factors such as effort, participation (Wormeli, 2011), and homework as part of the final grade (Vatterott, 2011), resulting in unclear communication of the meaning of the grades (i.e., points as currency for activity completion as well as demonstration of learning). Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools have been held more accountable through standardized tests, which are based upon state standards. In response, many school leaders have shifted or are considering a shift to standards-based grading practices, which emphasize students' understanding of state or local standards over points and percentages (O'Connor, 2018).

## Standards-based Grading

Standards-based grading is a model of reporting student learning separate from non-academic factors (e.g., effort, participation, behavior, and responsibility). In this model, formative assessments do not count in determining the final grade and students are provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning over time (O'Connor, 2018; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Wilcox, 2011). Rather than awarding points for activities such as homework completion, quiz performance, and paper writing, standards-based grading communicates students' understanding of course or grade-level standards.

### Principles of Standards-based Grading

School leaders need to know the philosophy of standards-based grading, including three main principles. Because school leaders will likely experience pushback when challenging status quo grading practices (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014), it is important they have a deep understanding of each standards-based grading principle, described in the following paragraphs.

First, standards-based grades should have meaning, which includes separating achievement from non-academic factors such as effort, participation, behavior, and responsibility (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011; O'Connor, 2018). In a pilot implementation of standards-based report cards separating achievement from non-academic factors in Kentucky, teachers overwhelmingly stated their standards-based report cards provided better information to families (Guskey, 2011). Figure 1 compares a traditional grade book to a standards-based grade book. These academic indicators are then assessed in a criterion-referenced manner utilizing a consistent scale.

Second, students should be provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding without penalty based on assessment feedback to increase the continuity of learning in the classroom (Cox, 2011; Wormeli, 2011). Students may earn opportunities to re-assess standards following the completion of teacher-directed learning plans. When students are provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding based on assessment feedback, they are held accountable for their learning in a way that honors learners who acquire knowledge and skills at different rates (Wormeli, 2011).

Finally, grade book indicators should be independent of extraneous factors such as assigning points for extra credit, homework completion, or homework accuracy (O'Connor, 2018). Homework and other formative measures are viewed as opportunities for learners to practice and receive feedback; therefore, the impact on the final grade is minimal, if anything, in standards-based grading (Wilcox, 2011).

### An Empirical Look at Standards-based Grading

Because parents are often comfortable and confident in the traditional grading practices they experienced in school, they may question the potential for positive academic outcomes when transitioning to standards-based grading (Frankin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016). As a result, school leaders will need to be aware of the potential relationship standards-based grading may have on standardized assessment scores.

A relatively small number of peer-reviewed publications (e.g., Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Welsh, D'Agostino, & Kaniskan, 2013) document the relationship between secondary standards-based grades and external measures such as state accountability assessments. The impact of standards-based grading on external achievement measures does not paint a predictable picture. While some studies indicate a significant statistical difference in one or more content areas (e.g., Haptonstall, 2010; Pollio & Hochbein, 2015), others do not (e.g., Townsley & Varga, 2018; Rosales, 2013; Welsh et al., 2013). In the current era of standards-based education and accountability, it will become increasingly important for school systems to generate letter grades closely correlated with these external assessments. This is

Traditional Grade Book		Standards-Based Grade Book	
<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Score</i>
Worksheet 1.1	5/10	Prove theorems about triangles	Proficient
Worksheet 1.2	9/10	Use sine and cosine	Proficient
Quiz 1.1-1.2	20/24	Use volume formulas to solve problems	Developing
Chapter 1 Test	86/100	Describe rotations of quadrilaterals	Proficient
Kleenex Extra Credit	3/0	Derive equations of parabolas	Area of Concern
Course Grade: B		Course Grade: B	

Figure 1. Sample of a traditional grade book compared to a standards-based grade book.

especially true given parent uncertainty with standards-based grading practices (Dexter, 2015; Yost, 2015).

### Implications for Secondary School Leaders

Secondary school leaders need to know implementing standards-based grading comes with a unique set of challenges. Teachers who have used standards-based grading report an increased workload and threat of grade inflation when compared to their previous experiences (Diegelman-Parente, 2011). Specifically, Spencer (2012) describes the challenges classroom practitioners face when implementing standards-based grading as determining the most important standards to assess and identifying additional time for students to reassess. Adept school leaders should provide ongoing quality professional development for teachers seeking to align practices with standards-based grading principles (Frankin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016).

Despite experienced teachers' confidence justifying standards-based grading practices (Tierney et al., 2011), parents have many questions about the impact that standards-based grading in high school has on college acceptance and scholarships (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). Parent concerns include college admissions officers understanding transcripts resulting from standards-based grades and students adapting to traditional grading practices at the college/university level. High school principals should know that university officials have communicated that applicant transcripts from standards-based grading schools are assessed equally to those from traditional grading schools, ensuring a fair and equitable admissions process (Riede, 2018; Buckmiller & Peters, 2018). As long as letter grades are generated from standards for each course, students from these schools will continue to be evaluated similarly to students from traditional grading schools.

### Implications for Researchers

While an increasing number of studies on standards-based grading have been written during the past several years, many have focused on qualitative research questions (e.g., Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Tierney et al., 2011), and the limited number of quantitative studies available has documented mixed results (Pollio & Hochbein, 2015; Townsley & Varga, 2018; Welsh et al., 2013). Educators promoting standards-based grading practices often point to theoretical articles (e.g., Bostic, 2012; Iamarino, 2014)

or practitioner articles (e.g., Erickson, 2010; Scriffiny, 2008; Townsley, 2018, Wilcox, 2011). Meanwhile, school administrators lobby school boards and parent groups about the benefits of standards-based grading despite a growing number of challenges. Researchers should consider capturing the perspectives of college students graduating from schools using standards-based grading to understand the system's longer-term successes and shortcomings. With over a century of research suggesting grades are a combination of student behavior and academic performance (Brookhart et al., 2016), additional investigation is needed to uncover effective professional learning for teachers and administrators overcoming this deeply entrenched belief system. Finally, researchers might consider qualitative methods to document the stories of school districts that have successfully navigated a standards-based grading transformation as well as those that have started but since withdrawn for the purpose of assisting school leaders considering a similar journey.

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