

Grading in a Standards-Based System

Here is a four-step process on how to help teachers transform their grade books—and their grading styles—to implement standards.

As districts and states continue the move toward standards-based education, questions arise around best practices for implementation. One concern is the classroom teacher's quandary: how to evaluate, record, and communicate student progress in a standards-based system. In many ways, this is a practical problem confronting individual teachers at the classroom level. But by working together to address these specific grading problems, they can more fully make the transition to a standards-based system.

Identifying the Problem

The grading problem came to my attention while I was an educator in the Adams County School District, in Westminster, Colorado. In the early 1990s, the district was making serious efforts to move toward standards-based education. As an elementary school teacher, I had been using a traditional grade book to record student progress. Each subject area received one page in the grade book. I wrote all student names in the left-hand column and all assignments and tests across the horizontal axis. I gave scores upon the completion of a class assignment, project, or test, and I assigned grades in each content area. This system was efficient when grading simply entailed calculating percentages on tests and integrating marks for classwork and projects into one final grade.

With the district's new focus on standards, teachers began to assess students on curriculum standards with district-developed assessments and to report student progress in relation to these standards. Because of this shift, two of my colleagues and I realized that we needed a new grading system. For the next three years, we worked to develop effective grading for the standards-based system. In the process, we became better teachers, focusing on students' progress and needs.

A few years later, as an administrator at a different school in the same district, I found other teachers struggling with the same grading problems. I realized then that grading was indeed a problem on a larger scale: Teachers needed support in designing evaluation

systems that were aligned with standards. The dual process that these teachers had developed, which used both the traditional grade book and an anecdotal system of taking notes about students in relation to each standard, was neither efficient nor systematic. We needed a more relevant assessment system.

Preliminary Questions

Before developing a standards-based grading system, educators need to ask three questions. The first question (or set of questions) focuses on the written standards:

- Do the standards embody the skills and knowledge that we would like our students to have? Are they written with a focus on what the learner will do? Are they measurable? Do they provide equal access to educational opportunities for all students?

If districts, teachers, and schools are required to use standards that they do not believe are high quality or if the implementation of standards does not address issues of equitable access for all, then perhaps these educators have more important concerns to first address before developing a standards-based grading system.

The second question focuses on how well classroom instruction relates to the standards:

- Are teachers consistently using standards to guide classroom instruction?

If teachers are not teaching to the standards or if classroom instruction is driven by textbooks, units, themes, and tests, then teachers must first learn how to use standards to guide instruction.

A third question focuses on how well assessment relates to the standards:

- Are assessments purposefully aligned with standards and instruction?

Until assessments correspond to specific standards, the transition to a standards-based grading system will be difficult. A teacher must plan for assessing all students on each standard for this grading system to be useful.

A related issue is whether teachers are required to report on how well each student has done in relation to each standard. When high-quality standards drive instructional and assessment decisions and when teachers report on how well each student progresses according to each standard, then the standards-based grading system will become essential.



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Developing a Standards-Based Grading System

We found an effective, four-step process for developing a standards-based grading system. The first step was to design a workable format. As elementary teachers, we used one page for each student. Each page listed all the curriculum standards for each subject. We also left space to write other important educational goals that did not necessarily belong to a content area or that were not captured by the required standards. We listed the standards on the left-hand side and placed a grid on the right for marking scores (see fig. 1). We had no headings along the horizontal axis.

The second step was to define three sets of codes. The first code defined the types of assessments. In our system, the assessment code was simple: *P* for performance assessment, *A* for assignment, *O* for direct observation, and % for percentage of correct answers.

The second code defined the different levels of performance. Once again, our code was simple and corresponded to our report cards: + for “Has

demonstrated proficiency of learner outcomes,” ✓ for “In progress on learner outcomes,” and – for “Has not demonstrated proficiency of learner outcomes at this time.”

The third code defined the time period in which the assessment occurred. In our system, different colored marks correlated with different grading periods. This was necessary because we could no longer put dates on the horizontal axis. Not only would the dates not match up for all standards along the vertical axis, but also some students would need more opportunities to demonstrate proficiency on a given standard. In the first quarter we used red, in the second we used green, and so on. We wrote our final evaluation for a given standard in black. We transferred this score directly to our report cards. Because we worked on many standards throughout the year, we felt that grouping assessment dates quarterly provided enough accuracy, but teachers who want to pinpoint dates can use different colors for each teaching unit, week, or month.

The third step was to create a grade

book that provided easy access to each student’s grade sheet. We placed all grade sheets in a small, three-ring notebook. We found ourselves using these grade books throughout the day, not just after hours for logging in test and assignment scores.

The fourth step was to monitor the implementation of the system and to make adjustments. In the first quarter of our new system, we learned that we could no longer log in one mark for an entire test or assignment. We began to break down all our tests and assignments into corresponding standards. To make the system more efficient, we wrote the standards at the bottom or top of the test or assignment and left a space for percentages of correct answers. On any given test, we logged in up to five scores for each student, and we aligned each percentage with a specific standard.

Clear Advantages

The most important advantage of this system was its impact on aligning standards, assessment, and instruction with a learner-centered focus. We could see how well the students progressed in relation to each standard and what we could do about those not meeting expectations. Our primary emphasis changed from what we were teaching to what students were learning. We were able to make clear decisions about what we needed to teach, how and to whom we would teach it, and how we would assess it.

With this grading system, my teammates and I knew immediately how well each student was doing in relation to each standard and which students needed additional support. When we glanced across a row and discovered that a student had three minuses, one check, and two percentage marks below 30, we knew that the student needed more work on this standard. We then provided the student with different resources, types of instruction, and

forms of assessment. In this case, a student would have more marks than others students beside the standard. We could also see which students had mastered a standard easily. Of course, during the year we revisited each standard periodically to be certain that students retained what they had learned.

This system also helped us determine how often we had assessed our students on a particular standard and whether we needed to spend more time on it as a whole class. For example, when

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grading an assignment, if we discovered that we gave only two marks for most students on the standard “The learner will infer character traits, motives, and feelings,” we would assess them on this standard again in our next instructional unit. Throughout the year, we discussed how many marks we needed in each standard to evaluate proficiency, and we worked to gather data to meet our criteria. For a curriculum standard such as “The learner will use predictions and meaningful substitutions to decode words,” we had numerous marks in the grade book. For a curriculum standard such as “The learner will describe how people are dependent upon food from plants,” we had fewer marks, which were often concentrated in one time frame.

In addition, we discovered how varied our assessments had been on a given standard and how well our students were doing on the different types of assessments. This system guided our efforts to make conscientious choices for assessment that would best fit the standard, the students, and the amount of time allocated.

The second advantage of this grading system was our increased effectiveness

in communicating progress to students, parents, and other educators. By using direct observation as a main source of data for student assessment, we dramatically changed the context of evaluation. Many times throughout the day, our students received immediate and meaningful feedback on their progress. As we monitored the classroom, we would informally assess their progress and place marks in the grade book. For the most part, students perceived assessment to be a continuation of classroom instruction and quickly learned that

talking with the teacher was part of the learning process.

If an assessment was performance-based, then students would often work with one another to build a rubric to evaluate their work. At the end of the assessment, they would look at the rubric and grade themselves. In this system, students understood the different levels of performance, and therefore they found it easier to meet high expectations.

This system also helped us become more effective communicators with parents. Report cards clearly listed all standards, and students were evaluated on each standard every quarter. The goal of Back to School Night in the fall was to communicate to parents what each standard meant and what they could do to help their child achieve proficiency. Parents took home a district-produced list of the curriculum standards that their child would learn.

Periodic classroom newsletters described the standards in the context of units of instruction. As a result, parent-teacher conferences became more focused. We worked straight from our grade sheets, with portfolios of student work to support our findings.

At any time, we could answer parents' questions on how well their children were performing. This was also true when discussing student progress with other educators. The grading system gave us easy access to each student's performance, and we could focus discussions on how to meet the needs of individual students on the basis of their progress.

Administrator Support

Although teachers will ultimately implement the new grading system, administrators can do much to support them in the process. Administrators can set up channels for collaborative planning and reflective experimentation. Some teachers may immediately want information on how to implement the grading. Others may need time to discuss why implementation is necessary and how it will affect them personally. Presentations from experienced teachers or outside experts can be useful as teachers work through different stages of the process. Matching teachers with mentors can also help teachers make the transition more comfortably and effectively. Most likely, all teachers will need many formal and informal opportunities to discuss the transition.

Administrators can also support teachers through the formative evaluation cycle: preconference, observation, and postconference. To emphasize teacher growth rather than accountability, administrators can recommend a peer coach. During an observation, the administrator or coach focuses on the evaluation practices of the teacher. The postconferencing session can then become an opportunity to discuss a teacher's evaluation system, integrating the teacher's perceptions and the feedback from the observation. Some questions that may help guide the discussion follow:

- How does a teacher make assessment decisions?

F I G U R E 1

Extracts from a Standards-Based Grade Book—Grade Two

Name _____

- + Has demonstrated proficiency of Learner Outcomes
- In progress on Learner Outcomes
- Has not demonstrated proficiency of Learner Outcomes at this time

- P = performance assessment
- A = assignment
- O = observation
- % = percentage correct/test

SCIENCE						
<i>The Learner Will:</i> <i>Compare and contrast related living things that reproduce in similar ways</i>						
■ identify examples of plant reproduction (spores, seeds, cuttings, buds, shoots)	+O	+O	+O	✓O		
■ know that related living things reproduce in similar ways	✓O	+A	+O			
<i>Analyze the reasons for changes observed in plant growth (or lack of growth)</i>						
■ observe the changes in plant growth (or lack of growth)	✓O	✓O	53%			
■ record plant growth	+A	+A				
<i>Identify plant parts</i>						
■ know plant parts (for example, roots, stems, leaves, flowers)	+O	✓O	77%			
■ know the effect of gravity on roots and stems	+O	✓O	88%			

- What types of assessments are used in the classroom?
- How and when does a teacher gather assessment information?
- What type of grading system is used and how effective is it?
- What must students do to demonstrate proficiency on each standard?
- What support do students who are not progressing receive?
- How is progress communicated to parents?

By discussing important aspects of evaluation, teams of educators work together to build a quality system.

Administrators who find value in reviewing lesson plans may choose to review grade books periodically. This can be a valuable way for administrators to learn how students are assessed in the classroom and what progress they

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are making. These reviews may be more effective if administrators periodically meet with teachers to discuss instruction and assessment rather than if teachers only submit plans and grade books.

Winning Results

The final product will vary depending on the curriculum standards, the number of students under a teacher's

care, the grade level, and the content area. More important than the end product is the learning process by which educators align their grading system with standards-based education. By working through this challenge, educators can strengthen the connection among curriculum, assessment, and instruction. ■

Author's note: Karen Short and Joan Spears were my teammates at Sunset Ridge Elementary.

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