

**Practical  
Solutions**  
*for*  
**Serious  
Problems**  
*in*  
**STANDARDS-BASED  
GRADING**

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# 1

## Introduction

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No single issue has dominated education more over the last two decades than to “get serious about standards” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996). Throughout the United States and around the world, standards have become the basis for aligning entire educational systems (Murphy, 2006). Standards give direction to education reform initiatives by offering consensus about what students should learn and what skills they should acquire. Standards also bring much-needed focus to curriculum development efforts and provide the impetus for fashioning entirely new forms of student assessment.

In education, “standards” represent the goals of teaching and learning. They describe what we want students to know and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school. Well-defined standards identify the specific knowledge, skills, abilities, and disposition that we hope students will acquire through interactions with teachers and fellow students in school learning environments.

Educators generally have welcomed the push for standards and the accompanying specification of clear student learning goals. The release of the first set of standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 was greeted with unprecedented optimism. These standards represented long-sought-after agreement about the particular learning outcomes in mathematics that schools

and teachers should help students attain. Soon thereafter, other professional organizations followed suit. The National Council for the Social Studies (1994), National Academy of Science (1996), National Council of Teachers of English (1996), and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1996) all developed standards in their respective disciplines. States and provinces also took up the task and, today, nearly all have identified standards for student learning.

As educational leaders became more deeply involved in standards-based reforms, however, they quickly discovered that implementation presents its own set of unique challenges. Among those challenges, none is thornier or more vexing than grading and reporting. While aligning assessments with newly formed content and performance standards can sometimes prove difficult, efforts to align grading and reporting practices can stymie the most dedicated reform initiatives.

## **The Difficulty of Change**

Of all aspects of our education system, none seems more impervious to change than grading and reporting. Despite numerous calls for reform based on our growing knowledge of what works and what does not work in grading, the policies and practices used in most schools today have remained largely unchanged for decades (Brookhart, 2004; Guskey, 2000, 2001; Haladyna, 1999). We persist in using these antiquated practices not because they have proven effective, but because they are steeped in long-held traditions. When asked about the rationale behind these policies and practices, the typical response is simply, "We've always done it that way."

In recent years, however, new perspectives have begun to emerge. More and more educators at all levels are taking a serious look at grading and reporting. Many are considering revisions in grading policies and practices, and some have taken on the challenge of developing standards-based report cards (Guskey, 2002, 2004; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000). While a few of these efforts have met with success, countless others have been thwarted by serious and largely unanticipated difficulties. Five problem areas have proven particularly challenging to those involved in standards-based reform initiatives:

1. Long-established, tradition-based grading policies and practices that actually pose obstacles to the implementation of standards-based grading

2. Assigning fair and accurate standards-based grades to students with special learning needs
3. Assigning fair and accurate standards-based grades to students who are English language learners, and then communicating the meaning of those grades to parents or guardians
4. Legal issues that influence grading and reporting policies in an era of high-stakes accountability
5. Inconsistencies between students' report card grades and their performance on other large-scale assessments

Recognizing the seriousness of these problem areas, several modern books on grading have dedicated short chapters or portions of chapters to discussing one or two of them. Although helpful in bringing to light the seriousness of these problems, rarely do these discussions provide research-based prescriptions for better practice. In most cases they simply offer the authors' opinions about how the problem area might be addressed and resolved. As a result, dedicated practitioners have little specific guidance in their efforts to address these complicated grading dilemmas.

This book is different. In each chapter the authors confront these difficult problem areas head-on. In plain and direct language, they describe the problem from multiple perspectives. They distinguish the issues that are most crucial from those that are less consequential and, in some cases, trivial. They describe the research base on each problem as it relates to standards-based grading and reporting, and then contrast various points of view. Lastly they discuss the implications of that research for better practice and then present specific suggestions for improving grading and reporting at the school and classroom levels. The final chapter of the book then provides a synthesis of perspectives on these five problem areas and offers detailed recommendations for future work on these challenging issues.

## **Background and Format**

The contributing authors of this book rank among the best-known and most thoughtful individuals in the area of grading and reporting. Each brings to the task a wealth of knowledge on the issues involved and the accumulated research base in their respective area. What makes them uniquely well qualified, however, is that in addition to their extensive scholarship, each also works regularly with school

leaders and teachers charged with addressing these major grading problems. As a result, behind their ideas and suggestions rests a deep understanding and sensitivity to the practical concerns of school-based educators, as well as a profound commitment to doing what is best for students at all levels of education. Every chapter reflects this combination of knowledge, sensitivity, and practicality.

In developing their chapters, the authors all followed a similar format. First they offer a detailed description of the problem as it relates to grading and reporting in a standards-based environment. Then they discuss the most current research and knowledge base regarding that problem and related issues. Next they describe the implications of this research and knowledge base for educational policy and practice. And finally they outline specific recommendations for improving standards-based grading and reporting. Each chapter combines a thorough treatment of each problem area with detailed and practical prescriptions for improvement.

## **Content Summary**

We begin our discussion with a chapter that I prepared titled, "Grading Policies That Work Against Standards . . . and How to Fix Them." In this chapter I describe five common school policies that impose procedural barriers to the implementation of standards-based reforms. I then recommend specific strategies for correcting them. Each of these policies relates to grading and reporting practices; that is, how students' learning progress is summarized and communicated to parents, students, and others. The five policies discussed include (1) Grading "On the Curve," (2) Selecting Valedictorians, (3) Using Grades as a Form of Punishment, (4) Using Zeros in Grading, and (5) Combining Multiple Aspects of Learning Into a Single Grade or "Hodgepodge Grading." Despite their critical importance, these grading policies are seldom considered in discussions of curriculum or assessment reform. Nevertheless, their powerful influence can prevent even modest success in any standards-based reform initiative.

In Chapter 3, Lee Ann Jung focuses on "The Challenges of Grading and Reporting in Special Education: An Inclusive Grading Model." Grades, report cards, and other progress reports represent important tools for helping the families of children with disabilities to understand the effectiveness of various interventions and how to make appropriate placement decisions. As Dr. Jung points out, however, among all required components of the Individualized Education

Program (IEP), educators struggle most with progress monitoring and reporting. The current emphasis on standards-based grading further intensifies the challenge educators face in determining fair and accurate grades for students with disabilities. To address this problem she presents a five-step model for linking IEP goals to general curriculum standards and then illustrates how to report information on student performance to families in a format that is both meaningful and useful.

A closely related problem is addressed by Shannon Sampson in Chapter 4 on “Assigning Fair, Accurate, and Meaningful Grades to Students Who Are English Language Learners.” Many of the grading and reporting practices currently used convey mixed and potentially misleading messages to parents and others about the learning progress of students who are English language learners (ELL). Dr. Sampson suggests that standards-based grading holds great promise in remedying this situation. She offers specific suggestions for implementing grading policies and methods that not only enhance teaching and learning, but also facilitate communication among teachers, students who are ELL, and their parents.

In Chapter 5, Jake McElligott and Susan Brookhart tackle “Legal Issues of Grading in the Era of High-Stakes Accountability.” They begin by noting relevant principles from laws that have been used in cases about grading (e.g., the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act), and then survey case law to address issues involved in recent suits. The issues they address include (1) Confidentiality—When do grades become “official” information subject to confidential treatment? (2) Responsibilities—What are the respective grading responsibilities of the school board, superintendent, building administrator, and teacher? (3) Absenteeism—Are grade reductions for absenteeism legal? (4) Grade Penalties—What type of grade penalties due to disciplinary infractions are legally defensible? and (5) Appeals Policies and Due Process—What recourse does/should a student have to challenge a grade? Their thoughtful analysis helps clarify and bring sense to these very complicated legal issues.

“Fostering Consistency Between Standards-Based Grades and Large-Scale Assessment Results” is the focus in Chapter 6 by Megan Welsh and Jerry D’Agostino. They begin by examining research on the convergent validity of students’ standards-based progress reports as completed by their teachers and students’ scores on state assessments. Not surprisingly, their summary reveals that teachers who develop truly standards-based and systematic methods of data collection typically appraise students’ achievement and proficiency

more similar to the results attained through large-scale assessments. Drs. Welsh and D'Agostino conclude by outlining procedures for successfully engaging teachers in the process of these more consistent methods of grading and reporting.

Finally in Chapter 7, James McMillan provides an overall summary of these problem areas in "Synthesis of Issues and Implications for Practice." After critically examining the issues presented in each chapter and discussing underlying themes, Dr. McMillan offers a series of keen insights in each problem area and then suggests specific implications for sustainable improvements in grading and reporting policies and practices.

## **Our Hope**

Too often today, educators charge ahead in their efforts to implement standards-based grading and reporting without giving serious attention to the problems discussed here. Those who do inevitably collide with these problems and usually suffer terrible setbacks in their implementation efforts. Some educators then abandon the process completely and go back to their traditional grading and reporting practices, knowing all the while those practices do not work and actually may be harmful to students. Others persist in their implementation efforts, making slow but gradual progress until they encounter the next problem and another setback derails their implementation plans.

As the authors of each chapter in this book make clear, these problems cannot be avoided or ignored. Nor can they be set aside and addressed at a later time after implementation efforts are well under way. Instead, they must be anticipated and addressed in advance. To succeed in the challenging task of implementing standards-based grading reforms, educators must be willing to confront these problems directly. And they must do so when planning for implementation, not after the process has begun. In other words, school leaders and teachers involved in these efforts must become proactive, rather than reactive. They must understand that these are unavoidable challenges that must be met head-on, with thoughtful, well-reasoned, and practical strategies for dealing with them.

We hope this book provides those courageous leaders with the tools they need to meet those challenges. We hope that it helps educators at all levels to understand the complex nature of these problems and the importance of viewing them from a variety of perspectives. We also hope it helps them recognize that these problems



are far too diverse and much too complex to be addressed with simple approaches based on naïve opinions. Most importantly, we hope that it offers the knowledge base and practical strategies needed to address and resolve these problems so that educators everywhere achieve greater success in their efforts to implement standards-based grading and reporting, and that all students benefit as a result.

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