

Charting a Course to

STANDARDS-BASED
GRADING

What to **Stop**, What to **Start**,
and **Why It Matters**

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Introduction

What is wrong with this picture?

The State Board of Education (NC) voted in October to begin the 10-point grading scale—in which scores between 90 and 100 earn an A—with the 2015–16 school year’s freshman class. . . . But the State Board will discuss Wednesday whether to start it this fall for all high school students. Critics argued it was unfair to keep existing students on the seven-point scale—in which scores between 93 and 100 earn an A. (*The Charlotte Observer*, January 4, 2015)

This is a conversation that is not worth having. Ninety percent, or 93 percent, of what? A 90 in Mr. Martinez’s class could, indeed, represent a much greater knowledge of important course or grade-level content and skills than a 93 percent in Ms. Lane’s class, where students are awarded extra points for punctuality, turning homework in on time, and bringing in a can of green beans for the Rotary food drive. To get even a 90 in Mr. Martinez’s class might require frequent demonstration of higher-order cognitive skills as well as content knowledge, whereas in Ms. Lane’s class, half or more of the students receive As for scoring 93 or above on tests that ask for nothing more than short-term recall of basic facts, plus responsible behavior and a can of green beans.

The discussion in North Carolina could have happened at any level in almost any state, school district, or school in the United States, and

it reveals a low level of understanding and knowledge about assessment and grading, even among professional educators. This lack of agreement about what grades should be based upon and what grades mean is not a recent phenomenon. Paul Dressel (1957) once provided educators with the following definition of a grade:

A grade can be regarded only as an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite amount of material. (p. 6)

That tongue-in-cheek definition was put forward nearly 60 years ago, a time span longer than the career of almost any educator reading this book. Surely we have come a long way since 1957 in attaining agreement and some level of consistency regarding the purposes and practices of classroom assessment and grading, right? Not really, argues Doug Reeves:

Neither the weight of scholarship nor common sense seems to have influenced grading policies in many schools. Practices vary greatly among teachers in the same school—and even worse, the practices best supported by research are rarely in evidence. (2008a, p. 85)

Deep and prolonged discussions about classroom assessment and grading practices in general, and about standards-based grading practices in particular, are in order in states, school districts, and schools across the United States. A lot of literature on standards-based grading is already available, much of it quite good. So why this book? Two reasons.

First, my perspective in writing *Charting a Course to Standards-Based Grading: What to Stop, What to Start, and Why It Matters* is shaped by both 30 years as a practitioner in schools and more than a decade working with schools and school districts exploring and implementing effective practices for classroom assessment and grading. As such, my aim is to provide the reader with a concrete, detailed, and practical blueprint for transitioning toward standards-based grading. This book reflects my direct experience with both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.

Second, the approach to best practices in assessment and grading put forth in this book allows a school or district to choose which destination or destinations along a progressive continuum of options it wants to move toward, and at what pace.

An analogy drawn from my experience outside education is relevant. I am a member of my local town council, which was recently presented with a proposal to repair and enhance a 25-year-old community amphitheater. The proposal begins with a big-picture look at what might be possible over a period of a decade or more, but then breaks the project down into three distinct phases. The town has the option of choosing to pursue Phase 1, Phases 1 and 2, or all three phases, depending on a variety of factors such as available human and financial resources, fit with the town's overall master plan, and changing community preferences. Changes made during Phase 1 prepare the town to move to Phase 2 if it decides to do so but can also stand alone as significant advancements should local circumstances dictate a halt to further development along the continuum of options.

Schools and districts have unique characteristics and circumstances that determine when it is wise to move ahead with an improvement initiative, and at what pace. Political climate, community receptivity, availability of human and financial resources, topic-specific leadership capacity of teachers and administrators, the presence of a teachable moment (a controversy erupted in the community last spring over how two students vying for valedictorian were graded), and other factors affect the readiness of a school or a district to move to one point or another on the continuum of classroom assessment and grading. This book recognizes that reality and is organized accordingly.

Destination 1, the first stop on the continuum, is for schools or districts that are just beginning to have the conversation about classroom assessment and grading and for the time being just want to “tighten up” a fairly traditional grading system. Six commonly employed practices and one widely shared belief about assessment and grading are exposed for what they are—counterproductive. Schools and districts that chart a course

to move from an “everybody do their own thing” approach to common expectations based on best practice will significantly increase the accuracy and fairness of student grades and will have taken a significant step toward developing a system that encourages effort and rewards continued learning. Although probably best conducted districtwide, advancements toward Destination 1 can be made at the school or even individual classroom level.

For some districts the target is to move beyond the limitations of traditional assessment and grading practices to an adopted package of beliefs and practices that actually drive changes in classroom instruction. Earl (2003) reminds us that significant changes in classroom assessment and grading practices have the potential to change virtually every aspect of teaching and learning in schools if we have the vision to use them to do so:

Changing classroom assessment is the beginning of a revolution—a revolution in classroom practices of all kinds. . . . Getting classroom assessment right is not a simplistic, either-or situation. It is a complex mix of challenging personal beliefs, rethinking instruction, and learning new ways to assess for different purposes. (pp. 15–16)

Destination 2 wraps changes in classroom assessment and grading into the broader context of a district-adopted guaranteed and viable curriculum. Stated simply, a district with a well-developed guaranteed and viable curriculum has identified a limited number of nonnegotiable topics and corresponding leveled performance expectations for every grading period of every grade-level subject (e.g., 5th grade science) and course (e.g., 10th grade biology). Classroom assessments and grades are then built on this structure.

Districts choosing to move toward Destination 2 will need to either first make a stop at Destination 1 or incorporate a discussion of effective and counterproductive assessment and grading practices into their Destination 2 plans. Charting a course to Destination 2 and beyond includes ensuring the presence of organizational conditions necessary to sustain significant change, understanding and executing the steps necessary to

create a guaranteed and viable curriculum, and developing a clear vision of what success looks like.

Because Destination 2 involves curricular commitments that extend beyond the influence of individual teachers and schools, this destination and those that follow must be undertaken districtwide. All destinations on our continuum of options for assessment and grading systems call for effective leadership and support; but because Destination 2 requires rethinking, repackaging, and redeveloping curriculum, instruction, and assessment rather than merely tuning up existing practices, a commitment must be made by both administrators and teacher leaders to provide specific supports to those charged with development and implementation. Chapter 11 details those supports.

Destination 3 takes change visibly and directly to the parent community by reporting student achievement by standard rather than, or in addition to, traditional letter grades. At this destination, grade books and report cards look very different from those that students and parents grew up with. As such, community engagement and effective communication—important at every destination—become crucial. Likewise, developing a multiyear plan for moving from a district's starting point through Destinations 1 and 2 and on to Destination 3 becomes absolutely essential. Chapters in the Destination 3 section of this book explore what an implementation plan might include and offer tips on engaging key stakeholder groups in understanding and supporting the central components of a grading and reporting system that is standards based and grounded in a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

Destination 4, competency-based education, is described in Chapter 15. In short, with competency-based education, students advance by demonstrating competency on individual standards or related clusters of standards rather than by passing courses. Course grades are no longer relevant. This is the last stop on the continuum of effective assessment and grading, and it requires a total rethinking of the purposes, nature, and structure of schooling. Competency-based education, a small but growing movement, offers a way to truly individualize education for students.

A clarification is in order here regarding the use in this book of the terms “standards-based grading” and “standards-based education.” Here the terms are used to refer to any system of classroom assessment and grading that corresponds to the specifications of Destinations 2 through 4 as described in this book. My argument is that any assessment and grading system bearing a close resemblance to Destinations 2 through 4 must have state or national standards as its starting point—thus making it standards-based.

As referred to in this book, standards-based grading is one component of standards-based education, along with descriptive scoring scales, frequent formative assessment, opportunities for reassessment, trend scoring, the separation of academic achievement and work habits, and valid and reliable assessment tasks, among other research-based, high-probability strategies and practices. Obviously the two terms—“standards-based grading” and “standards-based education”—are given more technical definitions by some researchers and are used somewhat differently by different writers.

This book can be used by individual teachers or teams of teachers to improve day-to-day classroom assessment and grading practices, which is the essence of Destination 1. But the intended primary audiences are school and district leadership teams—teams of teachers and administrators charged with leading and supporting a journey to systemic change. *Charting a Course to Standards-Based Grading* serves as a guidebook for that journey.