

# Making *Grades* Matter

Standards-Based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work®

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*Reproducible pages are in italics.*

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# Introduction

*By Nathan L. Wear*

I'll never forget the day in September of 2011 when several students showed up in my office demanding to be moved to another section of class with a different teacher. I was serving as principal at Solon High School in Solon, Iowa, and we were in the initial stages of investigating practices of standards-based grading. However, our implementation was inconsistent, and we had yet to develop any schoolwide principles. Understandably, this frustrated many of our students. In the case of these students, one section's teacher was allowing retakes and reassessments, and the other was not. One teacher was counting homework in the final grade, while the other was not. Both teachers were masterful instructors, teaching the same course and content, yet they had set up their grading practices in completely different ways. I thought to myself, "Is this fair for students?"

Recognizing this issue and the challenge this situation presented, I picked up the phone and called my colleague Matt Townsley, coauthor of this book and director of instruction in the Solon Community School District at the time. The conversation that followed was the spark that ignited a multiyear journey to successfully implement standards-based grading in a rural Iowa school district. Ultimately, it was a journey well worth taking, but it's a challenging undertaking, and we believe this resource can help schools and districts meet this challenge.

Put simply, Matt and I define *standards-based grading* as a philosophy of learning and assessment that centers on three core principles.

1. Grades should communicate students' current levels of learning based on standards.
2. Homework should serve as ungraded practice.

3. Students should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

Although these principles are common at elementary levels, which already often operate in a standards-based manner through the use of report cards organized by standard, they are also very important for secondary schools; however, they are more challenging to implement at the secondary level because these schools must incorporate standards-based grading practices with more traditional norms, including letter grades, class rank, activities eligibility, honor rolls, and other ranking or sorting norms.

Overhauling grading practices at Solon High School to align with these principles would shift both our school and district away from the traditional reporting of grades for homework, projects, and tests.

At the time, we had individual teachers dabbling in these standards-based grading principles, but we hadn't collectively defined them. Fortunately, there was a desire among staff to rethink how our secondary schools graded students. Intensifying this desire was our collaborative work with the professional learning community (PLC) process, in which we had established grade-level, disciplinary, and vertical teams throughout the district to pursue the three big ideas of a PLC: (1) a focus on learning rather than teaching, (2) a collaborative culture, and (3) a results orientation in which collecting evidence of learning is essential (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). Further, achieving these aims meant addressing the four critical questions of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016):

1. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 36)

When our district started to dig into these four critical questions, we knew we couldn't answer them through our traditional grading practices at the secondary level. Thankfully, our elementary building already had a standards-based report card in place from which we could build.

As our phone discussion continued, Matt and I realized implementing this grading change at the secondary schools was going to be a challenge. After all, secondary schools have a long-standing tradition of points-based gradebooks, percentages, and

letter grades. We set out to change our practice by implementing standards-based grading within our school's PLC process. Over six years, we were able to improve student achievement at our already high-achieving buildings. Prior to our journey, 85 percent of our students were proficient, and 25 percent of our students were highly proficient in nearly all grade levels and content areas on the state standardized test. By the end of our journey, nearly 90 percent of our students were proficient, and nearly 30 percent of our students were highly proficient in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Our ACT scores also continued to improve, outpacing the state average.

Although we are proud of these successes, we should note that our greatest achievement was not improved standardized test scores but the sheer number of students increasing success through their coursework. Before our implementation of standards-based grading, on average, 10 percent of our students would fail a course. After implementation, that number dropped to less than 3 percent. This strikes to the heart of the PLC philosophy, ensuring that *all* students succeed. Through this book, we hope to help secondary-level teachers and administrators working in a PLC to successfully adopt standards-based grading at their school or district.

## What This Book Is About

We designed this book to assist readers in explicitly connecting the concepts of standards-based grading with the principles of PLCs as Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomaas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016) envision them in *Learning by Doing*. Several other authors are also contributing to the literature on the need to reform grading practices. You may be familiar with the writings of Thomas R. Guskey (2015a), Tammy Heflebower (Heflebower, Hoegh, & Warrick, 2014), Robert J. Marzano (2010), Ken O'Connor (2018), Douglas Reeves (2016), Rick Wormeli (2011), and others, all of whom you will find listed in the references and resources section of this book. Many of their books are written with K–12 audiences in mind and aim to convince readers of the need to change grading practices. These are important and valuable works; however, we feel grades 6–12 educators have an unmet need for a book that explains in grounded terms how they can make this change work in practice. Our goal is to provide a practical how-to book for the thousands of secondary-level educators working in a PLC that makes explicit connections between the work of a PLC and the implementation of standards-based grading in secondary schools. As authors and educators, we believe that secondary schools cannot accomplish standards-based grading practices without a strong foundation in the PLC process.

## Who This Book Is For

Despite standards-based grading's growing popularity in elementary schools (Iamarino, 2014), transitioning it to secondary schools continues to evoke emotion and dissent in some communities (Frankin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016). This is because standards-based grading practices have not always been part of education at this level, and it is not always clear how these practices align with many colleges' and universities' long-held admissions standards. In one school district, the board of education voted against expanding standards-based grading practices across its high school due to a perception it would affect "students' higher education opportunities, especially concerning how important grade point averages and scholarships are to college and university admissions, as well as honor rolls" (Holland, 2018). We know this is not an isolated case. As such, we wrote this book for secondary teachers and administrators who recognize the need to shift secondary grading practices but who lack the tools, clarity, and buy-in for making the change.

Some of you reading this may have some working knowledge of standards-based grading principles and PLCs but have not yet connected these practices or implemented the changes you desire in your setting. You will benefit from this book's practical steps, pitfalls to avoid, and guidance on how to align standards-based grading with the four critical questions of a PLC. When you start your grading reform journey, we recommend first reading one of the many books from authors we listed in *What This Book Is About* (page 3) that describe *why* grading practices need to change. After all, strong leadership teams rely on the perspectives of many respected educators. We believe our book provides an excellent practical link to such great authors' and practitioners' theories by explaining *how* to implement standards-based grading at the secondary level within a PLC.

## How This Book Is Organized

Because the purpose of this book is to provide a road map that will help secondary school PLCs implement standards-based grading, we structured it to clarify the practices necessary to implement this change and examine how standards-based grading aligns with the big ideas of a PLC.

We based the chapters in this book on the three standards-based grading principles we established at the start of this introduction. Chapter 1 elaborates on the three principles that we believe best define standards-based grading and how standards-based grading aligns to the big ideas and critical questions of a PLC. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each delve into one of the three principles of standards-based grading and provide



the tools necessary to implement standards-based grading within a PLC. Specifically, chapter 2 gives guidance for communicating current levels of learning based on standards, chapter 3 shows how teams and schools can implement homework as ungraded practice, and chapter 4 details how teachers can offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of a learning standard. While we focus specifically on teacher teams in these chapters, administrators and leadership teams reading these chapters will be able to identify ways they can better support their PLC. Finally, chapter 5 provides practical steps for implementation teams consisting of secondary administrators, curriculum leaders, teachers, and others who are leading the process for implementing standards-based grading in a PLC.

Chapters 2–5 each include standards-based grading continua to help you assess your current level of understanding and implementation of either the chapter’s defining principle or the high-level administrative work of implementing standards-based grading. Each also includes an action-plan template you can use individually and with your team to develop steps for future improvement based on specific criteria. Finally, these chapters all include one or more PLC Connection sections we designed to give teams of teachers and administrators practical steps to collaboratively implement standards-based grading.

At the end of the book, you will find two appendixes with a variety of useful resources. Appendix A includes reproducible sets of the standards-based grading continua and action-plan templates. Appendix B has a sample parent-communication letter, sample guidelines other schools have used to establish a common purpose for standards-based grading, and a sample FAQ document schools often use to explain to community stakeholders (such as parents) the benefits of standards-based grading.

## **A Journey Worth Pursuing**

When Matt and I finally finished the phone call that initiated our journey toward standards-based grading at Solon High School, we were committed to creating equitable grading principles for not only the students at the high school but for all students in every school in our district. To achieve this goal, we focused especially on helping our teachers understand these clear standards-based principles for reporting student learning.

In the years that followed our phone conversation, hundreds of teachers have visited Solon High School and other secondary schools in the district to learn about this shift from a classroom perspective. Solon Community School District teachers champion the work of standards-based grading within a PLC. Most important, students no longer come to the principal’s office with concerns about grading practices.

make these decisions using a unified homework purpose statement. This unified purpose ensures all students have an equitable learning environment regardless of the classroom. Once unified in their purpose of homework, teacher teams can discuss and provide enhanced supports to students who are not currently completing the homework. The goal of this section is to provide teacher teams with practical steps for creating a homework purpose statement as well as suggest a realistic timeline for accomplishing this important work.

The process of coming to a schoolwide consensus on a homework purpose statement may require considerable discussion and work across collaborative teams. At Solon High School, we considered several drafts over the course of an entire school year before building a consensus. When teacher teams meet to develop a team or schoolwide homework purpose statement that repurposes homework as ungraded practice, they should consider the first two critical questions of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016)—What is it we want our students to learn? and How will we know when each student has learned it? When a teacher team uses standards-based grading, team members should assign all homework with the first critical question in mind such that it permits students to practice the standards the team intends for them to learn.

As part of developing a homework purpose statement, teams should clearly state their philosophy and intentions related to homework completion. Giving consideration to previous homework practices may be helpful for teams to understand their collective approach from a traditional view of homework's purpose to a mindset rooted in standards-based grading practices.

Homework must still be evaluated and even scored, but in the event teachers in a standards-based grading system consider accuracy in scoring a homework assignment, they should not record this in the gradebook, because the intent of the assignment is to practice rather than to demonstrate mastery. For example, rather than recording a number in the gradebook, a history teacher might choose to write several sentences of feedback on a paragraph students submitted reflecting upon the causes of the Civil War in the United States. Yet, it is important in this scenario for the teacher to document this assignment as collected and completed on time in the electronic gradebook. Refer to figure 2.5 (page 38) for an example of the gradebook communicating this change in practice.

Due to its formative nature, teachers should not solely use homework tasks to determine how they will know if each student has learned the material. Instead, homework, common formative assessments, and other checks for understanding serve as a dipstick informing the teacher's next instructional actions. Teachers then