

Grading with a Standards-Based Mindset

Changing how we think about grading is necessary for long-term grading reform.

BY TOM SCHIMMER

The movement toward standards-based grading is well underway, yet it is by no means complete.

Some schools have successfully made the transition to standards-based grading by realigning their grading and reporting practices to their instruction and assessment routines. While not without challenges, the move is complete and the new routines have been fully accepted.

However, more common among schools looking to reform their grading policies and practices is a process of change bogged down in philosophical debates, underlying biases, and hidden agendas.

Few discussions in education elicit the kind of visceral reaction as those about grading. Grading is an emotionally charged aspect of education that relies on

intentional planning and finesse. The low-hanging fruit of grading reform is the creation of a new report card template. But, if the levels of quality (proficient) are determined via

percentage increments (e.g., 80%–89%), nothing has really changed and the new report card is no more than an artifact of a promised change that never fully materializes.

The heaviest lift—and the essential first step—in any long-term grading reform effort is to shift the collective mindset about the process of grading, to develop a standards-based mindset. Until that's done, grading reform efforts will be operating without the

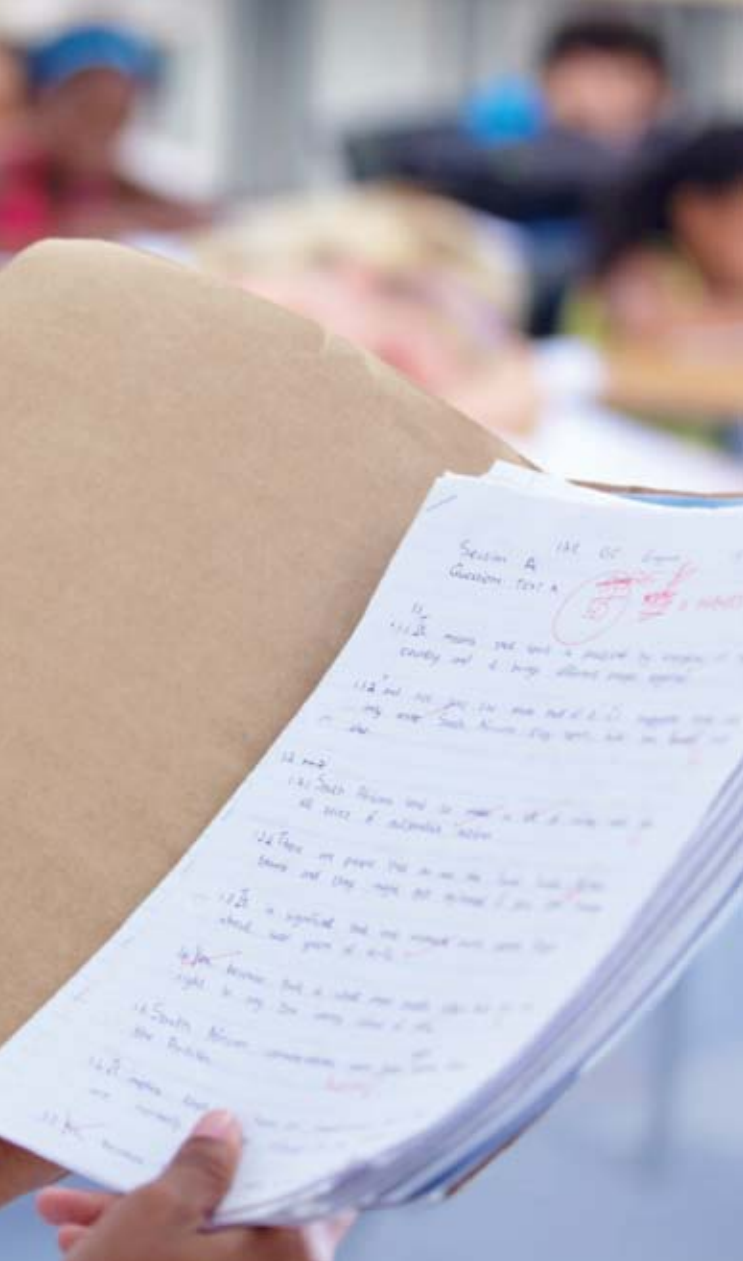


necessary net to keep individual teacher's grading practices aligned with one another.

Why a Standards-Based Mindset?

Most of us have at one time in our lives started and subsequently stopped a new fitness plan. When our commitment to be fit is strong, we find *reasons* to exercise and we go out of our way to make time for a workout. When the motivation to be fit fades, we tend to find every *excuse* not to exercise.

The lesson here is that our actions typically follow our thoughts. Like the fitness plan example, when we *think* and *feel* differently about grading, we will change *how* we grade. When teachers are mentally committed to changing their grading practices, they will find every *reason* to make it work despite the limitations of the report card, the grading program, or the lack of buy-in from colleagues.



Teachers can grade with a standards-based mindset even when embedded in a context that uses a traditional system of reporting.

The Fundamentals

Quite simply, a standards-based mindset is about grading with only standards in mind. Rather than encapsulating all activities and attributes, the process of grading becomes singularly focused on determining student proficiency against the standards. Developing a standards-based mindset allows individual teachers to make immediate changes to how grades are determined, even if the system within which they work hasn't.

It is both *simple* and *complex*. It's simple because only a few fundamental changes are necessary to establish a standards-based mindset; it's complex because moving away from traditional practices and establishing new grading routines is, again, the heaviest lift of the assessment conversation.

Grades must be meaningful so that the process of summative assessment can deliver on its promise to form an integral part of a comprehensive approach to assessment, according to P. Black, writing in J. H. McMillan's *SAGE Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment* (2013).

The *simplicity* of the standards-based mindset is that there are only four specific fundamentals that need to change in order to establish an entirely new culture of grade determination.

1. Grade only learning. The first step to clarity and meaningfulness is to ensure that grades represent only what a student knows or understands in relation to the standards. When grades include both learning and non-learning factors (e.g., participation, attitude, punctuality), they lose their meaning. The truth is that there are countless non-learning factors that potentially could contribute to a student's grade, and if every teacher includes something different, students and parents are left wondering how their child's grade was determined. The B in one sixth grade ELA class, for example, should be determined in the same manner as a B in another sixth grade ELA class. Standards are standards.

When grades reflect only *learning*, students can self-regulate their learning by using grades as a springboard for future learning goals. The third phase of self-regulation—after the forethought and performance phases—is the reflective phase,

Without this change in mindset, teachers will find every excuse to explain why it can't or won't work. This is why long-term grading reform begins on the *inside* and works its way *outward*.

Developing a standards-based mindset accomplishes two things:

1. By overcoming this initial heavy lift, the prospect of actual standards-based reporting is much less daunting. The final thing that should change is the report card, and it should only change as a result of a groundswell of pressure to realign grading and reporting practices with our standards-focused instructional paradigm.
2. The standards-based mindset allows the flexibility some teachers need to work within a school whose shift toward standards-based grading is incomplete or not yet started. In fact, grading with a standards-based mindset is not contingent on the system ever moving to standards-based grading and reporting.



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according to B.J. Zimmerman in Zimmerman and Schunk's *Handbook of Self-regulation of Learning and Performance* (2011). That's where students reflect on results and reestablish goals going forward. If students have any chance of correctly interpreting their results, the grades they receive must be free of all non-learning factors; otherwise students are left to wonder if they know more or less than what's reflected in their grades.

2. Give students full credit. Once a *learning-only* mindset has been established, the next step is to give students full credit for what they know, regardless of how low or slow they started. Grades must be an accurate reflection of what students know or understand, and the mean average (the most conventional method used to determine grades) cannot fully convey this accurately because it is, by its very nature, a combination of old and new evidence. What a student *used to know* is irrelevant if new evidence shows a much higher level of proficiency, but that's never reflected in a mean average.

Some students take longer than others to learn, yet by relying exclusively on the mean average, we fail to honor this truth by creating the subversive goal of *speed*. Not only is it important for students to learn, it's important for them to learn *quickly*. When students start slow (or worse, continually struggle), the mean average makes it nearly impossible for their grades to accurately reflect their true level of understanding, even if they eventually reach proficiency.

Giving students full credit means that teachers must recognize when *old* evidence of learning has been rendered invalid due to the emergence of *new* evidence and be willing to eliminate that *old* evidence from any grade determination. This has led many teachers to

repurpose the role of homework as more formative than summative, as more practice than performance.

Two aspects of the traditional homework routines threaten the accuracy of what is ultimately reported.

First, teachers can't be sure that the student completed the work without assistance. If homework results were to factor into grade determination, then any assistance would compromise the integrity of the grade.

Second, for homework to productively contribute to a student's growth toward proficiency, students must be reasonably familiar with the material, according to C. Dean and colleagues in *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2012). With traditional homework routines, the familiarity with the material or topic at hand is limited at best, which means those who need more time are disadvantaged.

Giving students full credit for what they know has also led teachers to use the practice of reassessment more effectively. Reassessment is not about hitting the reset button or establishing a series of do-overs. It's about creating another opportunity to verify new levels of proficiency given the targeted instruction and learning that occurred after the first attempt.

Something must happen between the first attempt and the second. When that *something* is independent study, a series of tutorials, or more targeted class-wide instruction, reassessment can reach its full potential of positively contributing to the overall process of learning. Used effectively, reassessment can play a significant role in establishing a culture where *if* students learn takes precedence over *when* they learn.

3. Redefine accountability. A common misunderstanding of standards-based grading is that students are no longer held accountable. Teachers with a standards-based mindset still hold students accountable, but it's a different working definition of accountability—a definition that views accountability not as punishment for undesirable behavior, but as responsibility for learning.

Our traditional punitive practices (e.g., late penalties, zeroes for work not submitted) have the unintended consequence of rendering some standards as optional. If a student receives a zero but is still passing overall—and is satisfied with his new reduced level of achievement—there is no reason for the student to complete the work. That's not accountability. If all learning is essential, then all learning should remain essential and there should be no mechanism by which certain portions of the learning emerge as optional.

Punishing irresponsibility doesn't teach anyone *how* to be responsible. If we want students to *learn* to be responsible, we must *teach* them how to be responsible. Create expectations and criteria that give students a clear understanding of what it means to be responsible.

Characteristics like responsibility are important for students to learn if they are to be successful adults. Some schools go so far as to formalize this importance by separately reporting student development within

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those areas. Students don't understand less because they handed their teacher something three days after it was expected. If the proficiency grade is lowered as a result, that's exactly what's being communicated.

4. Grade for confidence. Above all else, grading with a standards-based mindset means using grading practices that establish, maintain, and grow student confidence about achievement. Confidence is not about lowering standards or inflating a sense of entitlement; rather it's about a sense of real optimism about the possibility of success. Confidence increases the likelihood that people (including students) will try harder, persist, and feel optimistic when facing challenges and obstacles along the way, as Carol Dweck and Rosabeth Moss tell us.




With the implementation of more effective assessment, instruction, and feedback strategies during the past decade, it seems odd that teachers continue willingly to choose grading practices that could undercut that work and leave students feeling discouraged or hopeless. All that we do must leave students feeling hopeful about the possibility of success. Undercutting this confidence borders on reckless. Student confidence is fragile enough as it is; counterproductive practices will accentuate this

fragility and leave students with little optimism going forward.

Toward Long-Term Reform

By grading only learning, giving students full credit, redefining accountability, and grading for confidence, teachers will be well down the road to establishing the standards-based mindset necessary for long-term grading reform. When teachers grade from the inside out to reinvigorate the meaningfulness of the summative assessment experience, school or district policy changes are unnecessary. How teachers grade will *give* or *take* from the culture of learning established in the classroom. For grading to *give*, we must first shift how we think and feel about the process of grading. Developing a standards-based mindset increases the likelihood that the process of grading is a productive aspect of an overall positive learning experience. **AM**

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