LEARNED VS. EARNED

Best practices for adopting standards-based grading

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Introduction

The A-F grading system widely in use in schools today has its roots in the early 19th century, and it's changed little since then. With all the advances in educational practices and technology in the past 200 years, the same system of grading and class progression has remained prominent, particularly in higher grade levels.

With the modernization of industry and the shift to a more global economy, the educational landscape too is shifting. Technology is accelerating the rate of innovation, and new instructional practices are being adopted. Many schools are shifting toward student-centric instructional models, and existing assessment systems are not always capable of capturing these learning approaches. Peer-to-peer learning, guided inquiry, project-based learning—all of these strategies require the assessment of skills that are not always fully represented by an A-F scale.

Grades should be accurate, consistent, meaningful, and supportive of learning in order to better inform instruction and increase understanding[1]. Standards-based grading has emerged as a possible strategy to incorporate these traits in a way that addresses all learning levels, identifies deficiencies, and accurately reflects performance.

Standards-based grading isn't right for every school, and even in cases where it is a good fit, making this major change takes practice—the first attempt will likely never be perfect. This whitepaper explores both the benefits of standards-based grading and practical implementation advice from educators who have made the switch.

Note: *While there may be subtle differences in the way stakeholders are using the terms standards-based grading and proficiency-based grading, for the purposes of this report, they are used interchangeably.*

Let Students Show What They Know

Day-to-day activities may not look any different in a classroom using standards-based grading systems, but one peek inside the gradebook lets teachers, parents and students know exactly what has and has not been learned. Rather than averaging assignment scores over the course of a term, standards-based grading examines whether a student has achieved specific learning goals, giving visibility into a student's persistence and growth.

Consider the following examples—in Figure 1, the student is scoring poorly, but traditional grading does not clarify the specific topics or abilities with which the student is struggling. By contrast, in Figure 2, standards-based grading shows that the student is proficient at Objective 1 and has mastered Objective 3, but still needs some work in Objective 2.

FIGURE 1

	HOMEWORK	TEST	QUIZ
STUDENT 1	60%	75%	55%

FIGURE 2

	OBJECTIVE 1: Construct An Essay With A Clearly Stated And Strongly Maintained Claim	**OBJECTIVE 2:** Identify Tone And Theme In Select Poem	**OBJECTIVE 3:** Develop Strategies For Organizing Ideas
STUDENT 2	Proficient	Partially proficient	Advanced

Understanding how work is tied to standards against a standard can help students begin to take more ownership of their learning. Additionally, standards-based grading can help teachers become more effective. When every activity and measurement tool is specifically linked to a learning objective, teachers can easily receive insight into areas where additional instruction is needed.

We know that students will rarely perform at high levels on challenging learning tasks at their first attempt. Deep understanding or high levels of standards are achieved only as a result of trial, practice, adjustments based on feedback, and more practice.[3]

Quick Tips:

- Use formative assessment and practice activities to inform instruction, not determine performance.

- Consider attendance and work habits separately—while it is important to track when students were present and if they handed work in on time, combining it with academic grades can make it more difficult to identify areas that need improvement.

It's Not Just About Learning, It's About Teaching

Being able to communicate learning goals and pare down the standards into manageable chunks for students can help reinforce educators' grasp of these objectives. They begin to see additional connections that can be incorporated in new lessons and in more meaningful ways.

"I find that I try to be more pointed in my instruction," explains Aly Ferris, an elementary teacher at Sauvie Island Academy in Portland, OR. "Rather than just saying 'do this,' I have to communicate what specific concept they should be focusing on."

Teachers begin to break out larger lessons into more student-friendly chunks—a larger writing assignment that used to cover voice, conventions *and* style may become three shorter assignments where the student's goal is to focus on one at a time. This exercise isolates the learning and gives the teacher a more accurate picture of understanding. It also makes the learning more manageable —and less overwhelming—for the students.

Schools that have previously adopted standards-based grading are often ahead of the Common Core State Standards curve. As the Common Core has rolled out across the country, teachers have needed to become proficient at designing their curriculum in a way that they can measure students' progress toward a standard.

"The Common Core says you need evidence for this, but we were already saying the same thing," notes Christina Tracy, Principal of Howard Street Charter School in Salem, OR. "Common Core provides the topics, but within that, we're identifying how students can show proficiency."

Creating a Roadmap

The implementation process for a standards-based grading system is still nascent. There are no widely accepted methods or out-of-the-box products that deliver step-by-step instructions successfully implement the practice. Every school is different, and it will take some longer than others to successfully transition. Before deciding to adopt standards-based grading, schools should consider the following planning steps:

1. Identify teacher leaders to form a working group.

This team will not only champion the new system, but also give insight to inform the goals and processes that outline the implementation efforts. This group should be diverse to account for as many perspectives as possible.

"Some areas have had to shift more than others," Tracy points out. "The social studies department, for example, has really had to work through defining what is 'proficient.' It can be challenging to articulate what a student needs to know about Ancient China in order to say, 'yes they know enough to be proficient.'"

2. Construct a reporting system that meets identified goals.

In the beginning, it will be helpful to standardize on one reporting system and a common vocabulary to ensure consistency and transparency during the roll-out phase and beyond. Some schools find that using a numbering system, typically 0-4, makes it easier to correlate grading efforts to traditional reporting, should a student transfer.

In Figure 3, a scoring guide ranks students level of proficiency from 0-4.

FIGURE 3*

SCORE 4.0	**In addition to score 3.0, in-depth inferences and applications that go beyond what was taught.**	
	3.5	In addition to score 3.0 performance, in-depth inferences and applications with partial success.
SCORE 3.0	**The student exhibits no major errors or omissions.**	
	2.5	No major errors or omissions regarding 2.0 content and partial knowledge of the 3.0 content.
SCORE 2.0	**There are no major errors or omissions regarding the simpler details and processes. However, the student exhibits major errors or omissions regarding the more complex ideas and processes.**	
	1.5	Partial knowledge of the 2.0 content, but major errors or omissions regarding the 3.0 content.
SCORE 1.0	**With help, a partial understanding of some of the simpler details and processes and some of the more complex ideas and processes.**	
	0.5	With help, a partial understanding of the 2.0 content, but not the 3.0 content.
SCORE 0.0	**Even with help, no understanding or skill demonstrated.**	

*Chart adapted from Marzano Research Laboratory

3. Identify Tools.

The shifts brought on by adopting the Common Core have required technology vendors to create tools to support standards-based grading. Currently, it can be challenging to find a single tool that can support any of the most popular approaches of planning and tracking skill mastery, student by student. More rare yet is the tool that allows schools to gradually shift instruction from traditional grading to any permutation of standards-based grading.

"The hardest part is that the desire is there, teachers see the value in it, but the tools to do it haven't caught up yet," notes Darla Meeuwsen, principal of Sauvie Island Academy. "That makes it hard when you feel way further ahead than the tools that you need to get where you need to go."

4. Plan a pilot.

This provides the opportunity to test the waters and identify unforeseen obstacles.

"Piloting it is huge, because you'll find out really quickly where the harder parts are," says Meeuwsen. "If you're piloting it with a smaller group, it's easier to problem solve. So, when you go to the larger group, you can say, 'when this happens, this is what you can do.'"

5. Carve out time for collaboration.

It is important to remember that teachers won't have a bag of tricks to fall back on. It will be necessary to provide dedicated time for them to trouble-shoot and bounce ideas off each other.

"We start an hour late on Monday mornings," explains Meeuwsen. "During that time, teachers can meet and say, 'my kids are really not getting this, they're not proficient at this and I've tried this and that.' So you have that group exploring, 'how can we break it down, how can we have older kids working with the younger kids, how can we bring in this partner from the community?' With that time not only comes collaboration, but also problem solving for systems that you're using to support your teachers."

6. Reassess.

No one gets it right the first time. Use any challenges as learning opportunities. Tweak the roadmap, identifying areas that need additional refinement.

Sample Lessons with Standard/Proficiency Mappings

When making the shift to standards-based grading, breaking the standards out into effective lessons can be a challenge in and of itself. Check out these examples to see how teachers are tying curriculum to learning goals:

- **Read Write Think**, Example Lesson: Adventures in Non Fiction: A Guided Inquiry Journey. http://bit.ly/2aPqaDB

- **National Science Teachers Association (NSTA),** Example Lesson: Spring Into Energy. http://bit.ly/2aOsp9T

- **BetterLesson,** Example Lesson: Developing a "Golden" Eye. http://bit.ly/2amBpPu

- **Scholastic,** Example Lesson: Ruby Bridges: A Simple Act of Courage. http://bit.ly/24s1u6q

- **eGFI,** Example Lesson: *Wind Power for Your Home.* http://bit.ly/2b3TkMF

Securing Parent Buy-in

It is important to remember that letter-based grades represent a familiar frame of reference for parents, so switching to a new grading system requires additional communication to ensure a smooth and successful transition.

In a survey assessing community support of the switch to standards-based grading, the Beaverton (Oregon) School District reports that a vast majority of parents support "teachers using consistent scoring guides or rubrics to evaluate student progress" (83% of elementary parents; 75% middle school; 83% high school). Additionally, nearly three-fourths of the parents surveyed were responsive to representing behaviors separate from academics on the report card. In general, the parents were very supportive of the transition, but requested greater transparency around scoring rubrics.[4]

The outcomes a teacher hopes to achieve should be represented in the reporting, and the format used to display the data should be clear and meaningful. It will also be important for schools to clearly articulate the reasoning behind the switch.

"It is critical that you communicate the benefits with parents," says Ferris. "You need their buy-in. If the parents understand, they can help reinforce at home."

At Sauvie Island Academy, rather than sending home a report card four times a year, teachers and administrators have replaced two of the report cards with parent teacher conversations—an effort that requires about the same amount of time for teachers.

"There is so much that needs to be communicated orally and with examples of work with standards-based grading, and it's hard to encapsulate that in a report

Communicating with Parents

In his article, "The Communication Challenge of Standards-Based Reporting" Thomas R. Guskey outlines the following strategies to make the case for standards-based grading with parents:

- **Avoid comparative language:** Oftentimes, parents want to know how their student is doing in relation to other students in their class. By replacing comparative terms like "average" with a performance related descriptor like "proficient," they should begin to focus more on the learning.

- **Provide examples based on student work:** It will be easiest to illustrate what standards-based grading is, and what the various performance measures mean, if you have student work you can share with parents.

- **Be consistent:** Transitioning to a new system means new terminology. Make sure that any labels you choose to describe students' levels of understanding are clear, and that there is school- or district-wide conformity on grading practices.[5]

card," notes Meeuwsen. "We've gotten a lot more bang for our buck by doing

both. We get 98% attendance at conferences, and I think it's for that reason. They want to see how their student is doing, and if their student is not meeting those objectives, what a 'meet' looks like."

Howard Street Charter School requires that all incoming parents attend a "Proficiency 101" seminar to communicate the benefits and provide even more transparency.

"If we could go back and do it again, we would have a parent focus group to see how we could communicate it to non-educators and have information from them before taking the next leap," explains Tracy. "I don't think we realized how critical their buy-in was initially."

Conclusion

The goal of education is to make sure students can demonstrate that they have acquired expected knowledge and skills by meeting clearly articulated learning standards for each course. With the right planning and stakeholder buy-in, standards-based grading can help schools ensure that learning objectives drive all student work—and provide teachers, parents, and students with a complete picture of student learning that can help inform instruction and create more successful outcomes for students.

Quick Tip:

- Title IIA funds can be used for professional development, as well as the development and collaboration time required to fine-tune scoring rubrics to ensure grading is consistent.

About Alma

Alma is a A unified SIS, LMS, and modern core data infrastructure for K-12. To find out how Alma's platform provides the flexibility, support and the progressive tools needed to implement standards-based grading and other innovative best practices, visit www.getalma.com.

Footnotes

1. Robert J. Marzano. *Transforming Classroom Grading*, Publisher: ASCD, September 1, 2000.

2. O'Connor, Ken. "How to Grade for Learning by Using 15 Fixes for Broken Grades," Aug. 2012.

3. McTighe, J., "What Happens Between Assessments," Educational Leadership, Dec. '96 - Jan. '97, 11.

4. Beaverton School District, "Summary of Parent Survey," 2014.

5. Guskey, Thomas R. "The Communication Challenge of Standards-Based Reporting," The Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 86, No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 326-329.

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