

## **Standards Based Grading in the Middle School**

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### **Abstract**

One of the most critical functions of grading and report cards is to provide parents with information regarding their child's progress in school. Grades, report cards, and progress reports are critical instruments for communicating with families about their child's strengths, areas for improvement, and should offer accurate information on their child's learning progress that is essential for understanding learning effectiveness.

**Keywords:** standards-based grading, standards-based reporting, grading, middle school, secondary.

### **1. Introduction**

What is standards-based grading and why change from the norm-referenced, A-B-C grading scale the United States has used for decades? Standards-based grading involves measuring students' proficiency on well-defined course objectives (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Most educators recognize the inadequacies of their current grading and reporting methods (Marzano, 2000). One of the most critical functions of grades and report cards is to provide parents with information regarding their child's progress in school. Grades, report cards, and progress reports are critical instruments for communicating with families about their child's strengths, areas of needed improvement, and should offer accurate information on their child's learning progress that is essential for understand learning effectiveness. Recognizing the need for meaningful progress reporting, many schools have begun implementing "standards-based" grading and reporting practices (Guskey, 2001).

Norm-referenced standards compare each student's performance to that of other students in their same class. With this type of grading, learning becomes highly competitive, as students must compete against one another for the few high grades the teacher will give. This is the type of grading most adults experienced as students when they attended school. Criterion referenced standards, on the other hand, compare each student's performance to clearly stated

performance descriptors that differentiate levels of quality. Teachers evaluate student performance based on what each student individually accomplishes, regardless as to how their peers performed.

A major concern with norm-referenced grading is that students do not achieve high grades by performing well, but rather by doing better than their classmates, thus learning becomes a game of winners and losers, and because teachers keep the number of rewards arbitrarily small, most students must be losers (Haladyna, 1999; Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Strong evidence shows that “grading on the curve” is detrimental to relationships- both among students and among teachers and students (Krumboltz & Yeh, 1996).

Grading and reporting must be criterion-referenced in a standard based grading system. Teachers look for evidence from their students that they will use to evaluate student achievement or performance. With this in mind, teachers must to identify what their students need to learn and be able to do. Grades are based on clearly stated learning standards and criterion that have direct meaning and communicate that meaning.

Standards-based report cards give information about a student’s achievement of the school, district, and/or state learning standards. These standards should be directly aligned with the school district and state standards. If properly put into place, a student’s achievement is measured in relation to the standard rather than averaging grades or being compared to other students. The report card will give more detailed and accurate information about a student’s academic achievement while also providing clarity and consistency for reporting that achievement as directly related to the standards.

## **1.1 Formative Assessment vs. Summative Assessment**

Understanding the differences between formative and summative assessment need not be difficult, though some do find the definitions to have become confusing in recent years. Both formative and summative assessments are integral part of information gathering in a balanced assessment system. The reality of student achievement in the classroom becomes unclear if too much of one or the other is relied upon.

Summative assessments are given periodically to determine what students do and do not know at a particular time. Many teachers associate summative assessments with standardized test such as state assessments, but they are also used as an important part of district and classroom programs. At the district/classroom level, summative assessments are used as an accountability measure that is generally used as part of the grading process. Examples of summative assessments might include state assessments, district benchmarks, end of unit or chapter test, semester exams, or scores that are used for accountability of schools (AYP) and students (report card grades).

The key is to think of summative assessment as a means of gauging a student’s learning relative to content standards at any given time. The information gained from this type of assessment is useful, though it can only help in evaluating certain aspects of the learning process. This type of assessment is generally spread out and occurs after instruction every few weeks, months, or once a year, so summative assessments are tools to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs, school improvement goals, alignment of curriculum, or student placement in specific programs. Summative assessments happen too far apart to provide

information at the classroom level and to make instructional adjustments and interventions during the learning process. That is where formative assessment comes in.

As part of the instructional process, when formative assessment is incorporated into the classroom, it provides information needed to adjust teaching and learning as they occur. Teachers and students can use formative assessments to better understand at what point adjustments can be made. These adjustments help ensure students achieve targeted standards-based learning goals within a given time frame. There are a variety of formative assessments, however there are some distinct ways to help distinguish them from summative assessments.

Thinking of formative assessment as a practice and not holding students accountable in the grade book for skills and concepts they have just been introduced to or are learning. Teachers must allow for practice. Teachers can and should use formative assessments to determine their next steps during the learning process. Student involvement is another distinction that underpins formative assessment. If students are not involved in the assessment process, formative assessment is not practiced or implemented to its full effectiveness. It is critical that students be involved both as assessors of their own learning as well as resources to their classmates. Teachers can implement numerous strategies to engage students. Involvement and ownership of their work increases students' motivation to learn. This is not to detract from teacher involvement, which is critical in identifying learning goals, setting clear criteria for success, and designing assessment tasks that provide evidence of student learning. Some instructional strategies associated with formative assessments include criteria and goal setting, observations, questioning strategies, self and peer assessment, and student record keeping.

### **1.1.1 Tying it All Together**

Through the use of formative assessments, we can ensure that students understand and master the key basic skills and competencies necessary to succeed. Teachers conduct these assessments in a manner that allows them to use the data received to improve instructional methods and learning strategies. With formative assessments, teachers can look at the data with an eye toward giving more precise feedback while also planning for instruction strategically. Teachers provide students with constructive criticism designed to improve their performance while also using the data to guide instruction. The student and the teacher alike need to know how learning is progressing, with feedback being used to improve the learning experience of the student (Biggs 2003). Known as formative assessment, this comprehensive and interactive process is a model of mastery learning, in which a student progressively develops skills and confidence under the guidance of a professional (Formative Assessment, 2011). As Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury comment, the feedback provided has to be useful to the recipient, and in doing so, it has to be 'specific, accurate, timely, clear, focused upon the attainable and expressed in a way which will encourage a person to think, and if he or she thinks that it is necessary, to change' (1997, 4).

As previously discussed, there are a wide variety of formative assessments, including targeted questions, observation checklists, student interviews, activities, and quizzes. Although these assessments are informal in nature, they are critical in the teaching and learning process because they help lead students to success in summative assessments.

Good teachers use a repertoire of numerous classroom instructional strategies. Teachers using sound instructional practices for the purpose of gathering information on student learning are

applying this information in a formative manner. In this sense, formative assessment is pedagogy and clearly can not be separated from the instruction (Black et al, 2003; Butler & Winnie, 1995; Sadler, 1998). Simply put, this is what good teachers do. What teachers do with the data they gather is where the distinction lies. How do they use this data to inform instruction? Do they share it and use it to engage their students? Teachers need to do more than just collect information. It must be used to make sound decisions regarding strategic instruction.

## 2. Putting it into Practice

When determining marks, teachers must consider a “body of evidence” using both summative and formative assessments, as well as their professional judgment. Grades are based on the indicators for each content area and reflect only academic achievement. Behavior is not a factor in standards based grading systems. Formative assessment offers a way to monitor student learning throughout teaching to an objective and a process through which teachers can better understand their students' day-to-day learning and develop appropriate interventions to improve that learning," says Nancy Gerzon, Senior Research Associate at WestEd. We know from research that effective formative assessment has multiple components. According to Gerzon (2010), research shows that students make dramatic achievement gains when teachers break instructional units into a progression of clear, well-defined learning targets; involve students in setting learning goals and assessing their progress; give immediate and corrective feedback; and set up peer collaboration activities to build content mastery. Known as formative assessment, this comprehensive and interactive process is a model of mastery learning, in which a student progressively develops skills and confidence under the guidance of a professional.

The primary goal of any standards-based learning system is for students to meet the prescribed standards. This means everything teachers do, including grading, must be targeted toward the standards and indicators students must learn. Ken O'Connor (2007), a nationally recognized expert on grading, identifies two essential questions educators must ask themselves about grading:

1. How confident am I that the grades I assign students accurately reflect my school/district's published content standards and desired learning outcomes?
2. How confident am I that the grades my students get in my classroom/school/district are consistent, accurate, and meaningful and that they support learning?

O'Connor and others recognized experts such as Reeves, Marzano, and Guskey recommend the following guidelines for grading:

Grades must be consistent.

- grades must be based on and organized using grade level indicators
- grades must be based on individual student achievement related to those indicators
- grades must be based on quality assessment of indicators Grades must be accurate.
- grades must reflect student achievement only rather than behaviors (i.e. effort, adherence to class/school rules, participation, attendance)

- grades must only be based on individual achievement, even if they are the result of group work
- extra credit should contribute to the grade only when it supplies evidence that “extra work” has resulted in higher achievement in the content that is being graded Grades must be meaningful.
- When using measures of central tendency to calculate final grades, the median or the mode, rather than the mean (average) should be used.
- When determining grades, consider the ‘body of evidence’ and use professional judgment. Don’t just calculate grades.
- When learning is developmental, emphasize the most recent achievement rather than summarizing evidence accumulated over time.
- Zeroes must not be used in place of missing or incomplete work or as punishment for student behavior. Grades should support learning.
- Formative assessment practices should be used to collect evidence that learning is occurring, not to determine grades.
- Students should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning.
- Students should know from the beginning how grades will be determined. The learning targets should be clear and there should be no surprise assessments.
- Students should have opportunities to be active participants in on-going assessment and grading practices (i.e. participating in learning conferences, assisting in rubric development, having input into setting timelines and deadline, and making choices about how to demonstrate their learning).

## 2.1 Developing a Reporting Form

A primary challenge for implementing standards-based grading is developing the centerpiece for any grading system – the report card. Typically, this is a multi-step process. Administrators and teachers must work together to identify the major learning goals or standards that students are expected to achieve at each grade level. Then educators need to establish performance indicators for those learning goals or standards. What evidence will be used to best illustrate student attainment of each standard? Third, they must determine graduated levels of quality for assessing student performance (Guskey, 2001). This step involves identifying incremental levels of attainment, sometimes referred to as benchmarks, as students progress towards the learning goals or standards (Andrade, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The final step is developing a reporting form that communicates teachers’ judgments of student progress and achievement in relation to the learning standards.

The following is an example of a code for content standards for successful learners. These codes are designed to reflect student progress directly related to the standards.

3 – The student demonstrates proficiency of course level skills and concepts.

(They understand completely.)

2 – The student is developing an understanding of course level skills and concepts and has yet to demonstrate proficiency. (They are getting there.

Most students will fall here if it is a standard you are working on.)

1 – The student shows little understanding of course level skills and concepts.

(Serious concern as the student is really struggling and not yet

understanding the skills or concepts.)

## Conclusion

Teachers desperately need clear and meaningful guidance in developing grading and reporting policies and practices for students in their classes. They also need concise and unambiguous data on the effects of policies and practices. When we establish clear learning standards, standards-based grading offers information critical to student achievement and performance as well as offering important data for teachers regarding instructional strategies. The information is useful for both diagnostic and prescriptive purposes if sufficiently detailed. For these reasons, standards-based grading facilitates teaching and learning better than almost any other grading method (Guskey, 2001).

While most of the current body of research on standards-based grading is limited to the elementary level, where there is little differentiation in the curriculum, this paper shows that it still be pursued at the middle level where students often pursue more diverse courses of study. The system of grading discussed previously in this paper shows how marks can directly relate to each student's achievement and performance in their specific courses or academic programs.

Successfully implementing a standards-based grading system requires collaboration among administrators, teachers, and parents. To accurately interpret the reporting form, parents need to know precisely what the standards mean and how to make sense of the various levels in relation to those standards. Educators must ensure, therefore, that parents are familiar with the language and terminology (Guskey, 2001). To truly realize the value of a standards-based grading system, all parties involved must understand what grades mean and how they are used to improve student learning.

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