

Traditional vs. Standards-Based Grading: What's in a Grade?

I first had an issue with grading as a young language arts and Spanish teacher. I assigned participation points to motivate kids to behave, come prepared and participate appropriately in class. School policy at the time was to not allow students to re-take a test if they didn't perform up to their ability for one reason or another. I grew to realize that this system worked well for the kids that inherently cared about their grades and learned at a fast enough pace but not so well for those for whom grades were not a motivator or who learned on a different timeline. I became unsatisfied with grades and felt like there were cases where they didn't accurately reflect a student's knowledge or skill level – sometimes over-representing their proficiency and sometimes under-representing it. I worked to tweak and evolve my grading system each year as a teacher but never found anything that I was really satisfied with. Back then, there wasn't a lot of research about grades and grading, so I was very much on my own in finding a viable solution.

Then as an assistant principal in other schools, my frustrations with the traditional grading system took on a whole new level. Time and again, I would meet one on one with students to talk about their grades and how to improve them. We would pull up their grade report for each class on Skyward only to see a mountain of zeroes. Some teachers wouldn't allow students to make up late work. Many teachers allowed the students to make up the work but at a reduced percentage – usually 50% of the total points. I watched these students get overwhelmed at the virtual impossibility of ever digging themselves out of the late work hole and move their grade beyond an F. For other students, their grade was penalized for making mistakes on the practice or homework assignments. Even the nightly math problems became high stakes, stressing students out and forcing them to find alternative ways to get the correct answers like cheating. Most of them would eventually give up, thinking that they would try again next quarter only to find that because they hadn't done any of the practice work they now didn't understand the more advanced concepts.

I realized that it was the traditional grading system that was creating this situation quarter after quarter. I began to do some research about various grading alternatives and the idea of mastery-based or standards-based grading kept popping up in the research. The more I read, the more I realized that this kind of a grading philosophy worked to empower and motivate students in their learning rather than mystify and overwhelm them. My principal at the time let me implement various facets of standards-based grading and we began to see the effect that student empowerment in their education can have on achievement and a school's culture.

Now that I am here at South Hills as principal, the faculty and I have worked to learn more about standards-based grading. Several teachers agreed to pilot various aspects of this grading philosophy over the last two years, gradually working out the bugs and issues that naturally come up with a philosophy shift this big. We met regularly to discuss problems and research and to support each other in finding the best solutions to increase our students' capacity and motivation to learn at high levels. At the end of those two pilot years, we felt that it was time to embrace standards-based grading as a faculty.

The 2016-17 school year will see the beginning of a shift from a grading philosophy that mystifies, de-motivates, and stresses students out to one that will empower, motivate, and allow students to expend more energy on their learning than on dealing with stress or finding ways to cheat the system. Here are some things you can expect to see over the course of this school year:

- Your student's grade will more accurately reflect his/her learning. Behaviors, preparation, organization, and attendance will all be reflected in the citizenship grade rather than the academic grade. This means that the citizenship grade will carry more weight. It will be the only grade that will communicate the classroom behaviors, preparation, attendance, and organization of each student.
- We will move from an emphasis on what is taught to a greater focus on what is learned.
- We will take the mystery out of the grading process. Students will know what the learning goals are and how to achieve them. We will provide clear and useful feedback along the way and help students assess their own learning, analyze their own achievement data, and set learning goals to help them achieve the grade they wish to earn.
- Students will have second chance opportunities to demonstrate their learning on tests and quizzes. Teachers will help them prepare and study for quiz and test re-takes, in the form of a study checklist, so that students may show their learning growth.
- Students will be allowed to turn late work in for full credit because we believe that the learning opportunity that assignments create is more important than the deadline. That said, assignments are given to help students prepare for the assessment, so once the unit of study is over, students may only have one week to turn in all of their missing work for that unit.
- We no longer allow extra credit that isn't directly connected to learning goals (like busy work). Students may be allowed to do extra credit assignments that are linked to learning goals if all other work has been turned in.

This is a monumental shift in grading philosophies as the traditional grading system has been around about as long as public schooling. It will take time for educators, students and parents to adjust to the changes, so we'll be taking it slow and steady over the next few years. The results, however, are promising. Moving to a more mastery and learning focused philosophy will help students be more in control of their learning and, therefore, the grades they earn, thus empowering them to learn more rather than playing the game of points. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me by phone at 801-412-2400 or via email at ben.jameson@jordandistrict.org.

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