Improving Student Learning with Standards, Assessments, and Grading

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Benjamin S. Bloom

PORTRAITS OF AN EDUCATOR

Thomas R. Guskey

Few individuals in the history of education have had greater impact on educational policy and practice than Benjamin S. Bloom. During a career that spanned over five decades, his research and writing guided the development of innumerable educational programs and provided powerful insights into the untapped potential of educators to help all students learn well.

Benjamin S. Bloom spent most of his professional life at the University of Chicago, where he held the Charles H. Swift Distinguished Service endowed chair. At this university, he founded and chaired the program in Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistical Analysis (or MESA), authored or co-authored 17 books, and wrote numerous journal articles. He served as the president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), a member of the National Academy of Education, and a founding member of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Also the recipient of several awards, perhaps his greatest accomplishment was the profound influence he had on his students and professional colleagues. Much of his time was spent in one-to-one interactions with them, which have become known as "Bloom Stories" and have gained legendary status.

Many of the "Bloom Stories" are humorous and show his amazing quick wit. Others recall the kindness and encouragement, and subtle wisdom he showed in helping students and colleagues overcome obstacles or setbacks. No matter what the topic, Benjamin Bloom’s stories are touching remembrances that offer special insight into his uniqueness as a preeminent scholar, colleague, mentor, and friend. This book is a collection of these stories, with brief reviews of some of Bloom’s major professional contributions. Includes a CD recording of Benjamin Bloom discussing his book, Human Characteristics and School Learning.

This book will be of interest to educators at all levels.

Thomas R. Guskey is professor of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation at the University of Kentucky.

August 2005

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Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning

Thomas R. Guskey, Jane M. Bailey

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Teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members all agree that we need better grading and reporting systems. Often, these systems are inadequate because they are part of a tradition that can go unexamined and unquestioned for years. Here is the first serious look at the issue, written to provide all those involved—especially teachers—with a coherent and thoughtful framework.

Guskey and Bailey offer four pillars of successful grading and reporting systems:

- Communication is the primary goal of grading and reporting
- Grading and reporting are integral parts of the instructional process
- Good reporting is based on good evidence
- Creating change in grading and reporting requires creating a multi-faceted reporting system

Written to help readers develop a deeper and more reflective understanding of the various aspects of the subject, Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey’s work brings organization and clarity to a murky and disagreement-filled topic.

Here is a practical and essential guide for teachers, administrators or anyone concerned with understanding and implementing best practices in grading and reporting systems.

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Table of Contents
Introduction / Defining the Impetus for Change / Exploring the History of Grading and Reporting / Laying a Foundation for Change / Building a Grading and Reporting System / Grading and Reporting Methods I / Grading and Reporting Methods II / Grading and Reporting for Students with Special Needs / Special Problems in Grading and Reporting / Model Reporting Forms / Guidelines for Developing Effective Reporting Systems

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How’s My Kid Doing?

A Parent’s Guide to Grades, Marks, & Report Cards

By

Thomas R. Guskey

Over the years, Tom Guskey is the teacher from whom I have learned the most about the principles of effective communication. He has consistently analyzed and articulated our communication options with immense clarity. He’s done it again, this time for parents.

-Rick Stiggins, President
Assessment Training Institute, Oregon

ABOUT THE BOOK:
Most parents want schools to provide honest, clear, and explicit information on how their child is doing – with specific suggestions for improvement. Unfortunately, most schools are providing “progress reports” that parents find vague, confusing, inconsistent, and delivered in unfamiliar formats. How’s My Kid Doing helps parents make sense of their child’s grades, test scores, and report cards by explaining the advantages and shortcomings of different reporting methods. It answers parents’ most frequently asked questions about plus and minus grades, grading on the curve, standards, and narrative evaluations. And, it offers strategies for working with teachers and with children to improve the system. Most important, it illustrates how educators and parents can become true partners in a child’s learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
THOMAS R. GUSKEY is professor of education at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. He is a frequent speaker at national education conferences, and a leading expert on the topics of grading, assessment, and professional development in education.

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Grading & Reporting Student Progress to Enhance Learning

With Tom Guskey

New assessments and standards demand better reporting systems that are meaningful to both parents and students and have the capability to impact learning. This program will feature a variety of ways to report student progress and alternative forms of parent conferences. Policies and practices that negatively impact students will be examined.

- Consider the importance of changing traditional assessment and grading practices.
- Examine the role of daily and culminating assessments as tools for learning.
- Identify the purposes for grading and the need to clearly state it.
- Explore various ways to report student learning, including report cards and student-led conferences.
- Design reporting systems to better communicate and involve parents in student learning.
- Consider the impact of negative policies and practices to be avoided.

Think about the purpose of grading. Don’t use grades as weapons. They do not serve that purpose well and never will. We know that grading and reporting are not essential to the instructional process. Teachers teach and students learn in the absence of grades. You need to decide the purpose.

- Tom Guskey

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Questionnaires
and
Activities
1. What do you believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students’ work?
   a. __________________________________________________________________
   b. __________________________________________________________________

2. Ideally, what purposes do you believe report cards or grades should serve?
   a. __________________________________________________________________
   b. __________________________________________________________________

3. Although classes certainly differ, on average, what percent of the students in your classes receive the following grades:

   A _____  B _____  C _____  D _____  E or F _____

4. What would you consider an ideal distribution of grades (in percent) in your classes?

   A _____  B _____  C _____  D _____  E or F _____

5. The current grading system in many schools uses the following combination of letter grades, percentages, and/or categories:

   A  100% - 90%  Excellent  Exceptional
   B  89% - 80%  Good     Proficient
   C  79% - 70%  Average  Basic
   D  69% - 60%  Poor     Below Basic
   E or F  59% -    Failing

   If you could make any changes in this system, what would they be?
   a. __________________________________________________________________
   b. __________________________________________________________________

6. Is there an established, uniform grading policy in your school or district?
   Yes _____  No _____  I don’t know _____
How well would you say you understand those policies?

Not at all       Somewhat       Very well

1 ------------ 2 ------------ 3 ------------ 4 ------------ 5

7. Grades and other reporting systems serve a variety of purposes. Based on your beliefs, rank order the following purposes from 1 (Most important) to 6 (Least important).

____ Communicate information to parents about students’ achievement and performance in school
____ Provide information to students for self-evaluation
____ Select, identify, or group students for certain educational programs (Honor classes, etc.)
____ Provide incentives for students to learn
____ Document students’ performance to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs
____ Provide evidence of students’ lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility

8. Teachers use a variety of elements in determining students’ grades. Among those listed below, please indicate those that you use and about what percent (%) each contributes to students’ grades.

____ Major examinations          ____ Oral presentations
____ Major compositions          ____ Homework completion
____ Unit tests                  ____ Homework quality
____ Class quizzes               ____ Class participation
____ Reports or projects         ____ Work habits and neatness
____ Student portfolios          ____ Effort put forth
____ Exhibits of students’ work  ____ Class attendance
____ Laboratory projects         ____ Punctuality of assignments
____ Students’ notebooks or journals ____ Class behavior or attitude
____ Classroom observations      ____ Progress made
____ Other (Describe) _____________________________
____ Other (Describe) _____________________________

9. What are the most positive aspects of report cards and the process of assigning grades?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

10. What do you like least about report cards and the process of assigning grades?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
Grading Formulae: What Grade Do Students Deserve?
© Thomas R. Guskey

The table below shows the performance of seven students over five instructional units. Also shown are the summary scores and grades for these students calculated by three different methods: (1) the simple arithmetic average of unit scores, (2) the median or middle score from the five units, and (3) the arithmetic average, deleting the lowest unit score in the group. Consider, too, the following explanations for these score patterns:

**Student 1** struggled in the early part of the marking period but continued to work hard, improved in each unit, and did excellently in unit 5.

**Student 2** began with excellent performance in unit 1 but then lost motivation, declined steadily during the marking period, and received a failing mark for unit 5.

**Student 3** performed steadily throughout the marking period, receiving three B’s and two C’s, all near the B – C cut-score.

**Student 4** began the marking period poorly, failing the first two units, but with newfound interest performed excellently in units 3, 4, and 5.

**Student 5** began the marking period excellently, but then lost interest and failed the last two units.

**Student 6** skipped school (unexcused absence) during the first unit, but performed excellently in every other unit.

**Student 7** performed excellently in the first four units, but was caught cheating on the assessment for unit 5, resulting in a score of zero for that unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Unit 1</th>
<th>Unit 2</th>
<th>Unit 3</th>
<th>Unit 4</th>
<th>Unit 5</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Median Score</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Deleting Lowest</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>98.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>98.8</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grading standards:** 90% – 100% = A  
80% – 89% = B  
70% – 79% = C  
60% – 69% = D  
59% = F

**Questions:** Which grading method is best? Which is fairest? What grade does each student deserve?
GRADING AND REPORTING STUDENT LEARNING


General Conclusions From the Research:

1. Grading and reporting are not essential to the instructional process.
2. Grading and reporting serve a variety of purposes, but no one method serves all purposes well.
3. Grading and reporting will always involve some degree of subjectivity.
4. Mathematic precision does not yield fairer or more objective grading.
5. Grades have some value as a reward, but no value as a punishment.
6. Grading and reporting should always be done in reference to learning criteria, never "on the curve."
7. Three general types of learning criteria are used in grading and reporting:
   a. Product criteria
   b. Process criteria
   c. Progress criteria
8. Report cards are but one way to communicate with parents.

Guidelines for Better Practice:

1. Begin with a clear statement of purpose and specific learning goals.
   a. Why are grading and reporting done?
   b. For whom is the information intended?
   c. What are the desired results?
2. Ensure that grading and reporting methods provide accurate and understandable descriptions students learning.
   a. More a challenge in clear thinking and effective communication
   b. Less an exercise in quantifying achievement
3. Use grading and reporting methods to enhance teaching and learning.
   a. Facilitate communication between teachers, students, parents, and others.
   b. Ensure that efforts to help students are consistent and harmonious
4. Alleviate questionable practices:
   a. Example 1: Averaging to obtain a student's grade or mark.
   b. Example 2: Assigning a 'zero' to work that is late, missed, or neglected.
   c. Example 3: Taking credit away from students for behavioral infractions.

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Grading and Reporting Student Learning

Thomas R. Guskey

Systemic Change

- Change is a Highly Complex Process
- Professional Development is Essential

**Change** is a Prerequisite for Improvement!

Grading and Reporting Questionnaire

Guiding Questions

1. What are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students’ work?
2. Ideally, what purposes should report cards or grades serve?
3. What elements should teachers use in determining students’ grades? (For example, major assessments, compositions, homework, attendance, class participation, etc.)

Purposes of Grading

1. Communicate the Achievement Status of Students to Their Parents and Others
2. Provide Information for Student Self-Evaluation
3. Select, Identify, or Group Students for Certain Educational Programs
4. Provide Incentives for Students to Learn
5. Document Students’ Performance to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Instructional Programs
6. Provide Evidence of Students’ Lack of Effort or Inappropriate Responsibility
Grading Elements

- Major Exams or Compositions
- Class Quizzes
- Reports or Projects
- Student Portfolios
- Exhibits of Students' Work
- Laboratory Projects
- Students' Notebooks or Journals
- Classroom Observations
- Oral Presentations

- Homework Completion
- Homework Quality
- Class Participation
- Work Habits and Neatness
- Effort Put Forth
- Class Attendance
- Punctuality of Assignments
- Class Behavior or Attitude
- Progress Made

Guiding Questions

1. Do you want a more general report that would look similar for several grade levels, or a more specific report that would look different at each grade level?
2. What product, process, and progress criteria should be reported at each level?
3. Within each subject area, how may standards will be reported? What are they?
4. How many levels of performance will be reported for each standard? How will these be labeled?
5. Will teachers’ comments be encouraged and included? What form will these take? How will they be recorded?
6. How should things be arranged on the report? What format will be used? What information should be included?
7. What will parents be expected to do with this information?
8. What policies need to accompany these new reporting procedures (i.e., the use of zeros; absences; punctuality of assignments; make-up work; behavioral infractions; homework; final examinations; etc.)
9. When should the perspectives and input of parents and/or students be sought?

General Conclusions from the Research on Grading

#1 Grading and Reporting are NOT Essential to the Instructional Process

- Teachers can teach without grades.
- Students can and do learn without grades.

Checking is Essential!

- Checking is Diagnostic
  - Teacher is an Advocate
- Grading is Evaluative
  - Teacher is a Judge

#2 No One Method of Grading and Reporting Serves All Purposes Well!
Purposes of Grading
1. Communicate the Achievement Status of Students to Their Parents and Others
2. Provide Information for Student Self-Evaluation
3. Select, Identify, or Group Students for Certain Educational Programs
4. Provide Incentives for Students to Learn
5. Document Students’ Performance to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Instructional Programs
6. Provide Evidence of Students’ Lack of Effort or Inappropriate Responsibility

Architecture:
Form *Follows* Function.

Education:
Method *Follows* Purpose!

Solution:
Multiple Purposes Require a *Multi-Faceted, Comprehensive Reporting System!*

Critical Factors in Determining Purposes
1. *What* information do we want to communicate?
2. *Who* is the primary audience?
3. *How* would we like that information to be used?

Letter Grades
- Advantages:
  1. Brief Description of Adequacy
  2. Generally Understood
- Disadvantages:
  1. Require the Abstraction of Lots of Information
  2. Cut-offs are Arbitrary
  3. Easily Misinterpreted

Percentage Grades
- Advantages:
  1. Provide Finer Discriminations
  2. Increase Variation in Grades
- Disadvantages:
  1. Require the Abstraction of Lots of Information
  2. Increased Number of Arbitrary Cut-offs
  3. Greater Influence of Subjectivity
Standards-Based (Checklist of Skills)

**Advantages:**
1. Clear Description of Achievement
2. Useful for Diagnosis and Prescription

**Disadvantages:**
1. Often Too Complicated for Parents to Understand
2. Seldom Communicate the Appropriateness of Progress

---

**Steps in Developing Standards-Based Grading**

1. Identify the major learning goals or standards that students will be expected to achieve at each grade level or in each course of study.
2. Establish performance indicators for the learning goals or standards.
3. Determine graduated levels of performance (benchmarks) for assessing each goal or standard.
4. Develop reporting forms that communicate teachers' judgments of students' learning progress and culminating achievement in relation to the learning goals or standards.

---

**Challenges in Determining Graduated Levels of Student Performance**

1. **Levels of Understanding / Quality**
   - Unaccomplished
   - Beginning
   - Progressing
   - Proficient
   - Advanced
2. **Level of Mastery / Proficiency**
   - Below Basic
   - Basic
   - Proficient
3. **Frequency of Display**
   - Rarely
   - Occasionally
   - Frequently
4. **Degree of Effectiveness**
   - Ineffective
   - Moderately Effective
   - Highly Effective

---

**Guidelines for Reporting on Standards**

1. Avoid Comparative Language. “Below Average,” “Average,” and “Superior” communicates standing among classmates, not progress on standards.
2. Provide Examples Based on Student Work. Show precisely what each level of performance means, based on models of excellence.
3. **Distinguish “Levels of Understanding” and “Frequency of Display.”** “Quality” is not the same as “Rate of Occurrence.”
4. Be Consistent. Use similar terms across school levels, assessments, instructional materials, and reporting forms.

---

**Steps in Developing Standards-Based Grading**

1. The process is more a challenge in effective communication than simply documenting achievement.
2. Interpretation is the key element in effective communication.
3. Consistency is essential to accurate interpretation.

---

**Narratives**

**Advantages:**
1. Clear Description of Progress and Achievement
2. Useful for Diagnosis and Prescription

**Disadvantages:**
1. Extremely Time-Consuming for Teachers to Develop
2. May Not Communicate Appropriateness of Progress
3. Comments Often Become Standardized
Methods can be **Combined** to Enhance their Communicative Value!

---

**Grades with Comments** are Better than **Grades Alone**!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Excellent! Keep it up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Good work. Keep at it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Perhaps try to do still better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Let’s bring this up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Let’s raise this grade!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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**Solution:**

1. Determine the Primary Purpose of each Grading and Reporting Tool.
2. **Select or Develop** the Most Appropriate Method for Each Tool.
3. Develop a **Multi-Faceted, Comprehensive Reporting System**!

---

**#3 Grading and Reporting Will Always Involve Some Degree of Subjectivity!**

---

**In General, Reporting is **More Subjective:**

- The More *Detailed* the Reporting Method.
- The More *Analytic* the Reporting Process.
- The More ‘Effort’ is Considered.

---

However, More *Detailed* and Analytic Reports are Better *Learning Tools*!
**Challenge:**

To Balance Reporting Needs with Instructional Purposes

---

**#4 Mathematic Precision**

Does **NOT** Yield Fairer or More Objective Grading!

---

**Student Achievement Profiles:**

Student 1 struggled in the early part of the marking period but continued to work hard, improved in each unit, and did excellently in unit 5.

Student 2 began with excellent performance in unit 1 but then lost motivation, declined steadily during the marking period, and received a failing mark for unit 5.

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**Grading Formulae**

<table>
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<th>Student</th>
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<th>Unit 2</th>
<th>Unit 3</th>
<th>Unit 4</th>
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**Questionable Practices:**

- ✔️ Averaging to Obtain a Course Grade
- ✔️ Giving Zeros for Work Missed or Work Turned in Late
- ✔️ Taking Credit Away from Students For Infractions

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**Alternatives to Averaging Inconsistent Evidence on Student Learning:**

- ✔️ Give priority to the most recent evidence.
- ✔️ Give priority to the most comprehensive evidence.
- ✔️ Give priority to evidence related to the most important learning goals or standards.
Alternatives to Giving Zeros:

- Assign “I” or “Incomplete” Grades. Include specific and immediate consequences.
- Report Behavioral Aspects Separately. Separate “Product” (Achievement) from “Process” and “Progress.”
- Change Grading Scales. Use integers (A=4, B=3, C=2, ...) instead of percentages.

Grading requires **Thoughtful** and **Informed** Professional Judgment!

#5 Grades have Some Value as Rewards, but **NO** Value as Punishments!

Message:
Do Not Use Grades as Weapons!

#6 Grading and Reporting should **Always** be done in reference to **Learning Criteria**, Never “On The Curve”

Grading Criteria

1. Product Criteria
2. Process Criteria
3. Progress Criteria
#7 Grade Distributions Reflect *Both*:
- 1. Students’ Level of Performance
- 2. The Quality of the Teaching

#8 Report Cards are but *One Way* of Communicating with Parents!

**Forms of Reporting to Parents Include:**
- Report Cards
- Notes with Report Cards
- Standardized Assessment Reports
- Weekly / Monthly Progress Reports
- Phone Calls
- School Open Houses
- Newsletters
- Personal Letters
- Homework
- Evaluated Assignments or Projects
- Portfolios or Exhibits
- School Web Pages
- Homework Hotlines
- Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Student-Led Conferences

For More Information on Student-Led Conferences, contact:

Jane M. Bailey
Director of Teaching & Learning
Petoskey Public Schools
1130 Howard Street
Petoskey, MI 49770

Phone: 231/348-2352
E-mail: bailey.jm.m@petoskeyschools.org

#9 **High Percentages** are *NOT* the same as *High Standards!*

In Reporting to Parents:
1. Include *Positive Comments*.
2. Describe *Specific Learning Goals or Expectations* (Include Samples of the Student’s Work).
3. Provide *Specific Suggestions* on What Parents Can Do To Help.
Think about your days as a student. Then, describe your most memorable...

- Negative grading experience.
- Positive grading experience.

Guidelines for Better Practice

#1 Begin with a Clear Statement of Purpose

- Why Grading and Reporting Are Done?
- For Whom the Information is Intended?
- What are the Desired Results?

#2 Provide Accurate and Understandable Descriptions of Student Learning

- More a Challenge in Effective Communication
- Less an Exercise in Quantifying Achievement

#3 Use Grading and Reporting to Enhance Teaching and Learning

- Facilitate Communication Between Teachers, Parents, and Students
- Ensure Efforts to Help Students are Harmonious

For Help or Additional Information:

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How Classroom Assessments Improve Learning

Teachers who develop useful assessments, provide corrective instruction, and give students second chances to demonstrate success can improve their instruction and help students learn.

Thomas R. Guskey

Large-scale assessments, like all assessments, are designed for a specific purpose. Those used in most states today are designed to rank-order schools and students for the purposes of accountability—and some do so fairly well. But assessments designed for ranking are generally not good instruments for helping teachers improve their instruction or modify their approach to individual students. First, students take them at the end of the school year, when most instructional activities are near completion. Second, teachers don’t receive the results until two or three months later, by which time their students have usually moved on to other teachers. And third, the results that teachers receive usually lack the level of detail needed to target specific improvements (Barton, 2002; Kifer, 2001).

The assessments best suited to guide improvements in student learning are the quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and other assessments that teachers administer on a regular basis in their classrooms. Teachers trust the results from these assessments because of their direct relation to classroom instructional goals. Plus, results are immediate and easy to analyze at the individual student level. To use classroom assessments to make improvements, however, teachers must change both their view of assessments and their interpretation of results. Specifically, they need to see their assessments as an integral part of the instruction process and as crucial for helping students learn.

Despite the importance of assessments in education today, few teachers receive much formal training in assessment design or analysis. A recent survey...
showed, for example, that fewer than half the states require competence in assessment for licensure as a teacher (Stiggins, 1999). Lacking specific training, teachers rely heavily on the assessments offered by the publisher of their textbooks or instructional materials. When no suitable assessments are available, teachers construct their own in a haphazard fashion, with questions and essay prompts similar to the ones that their teachers used. They treat assessments as evaluation devices to administer when instructional activities are completed and to use primarily for assigning students’ grades.

To use assessments to improve instruction and student learning, teachers need to change their approach to assessments in three important ways.

**Make Assessments Useful For Students**

Nearly every student has suffered the experience of spending hours preparing for a major assessment, only to discover that the material that he or she had studied was different from what the teacher chose to emphasize on the assessment. This experience teaches students two unfortunate lessons. First, students realize that hard work and effort don’t pay off in school because the time and effort that they spent studying had little or no influence on the results. And second, they learn that they cannot trust their teachers (Guskey, 2000a). These are hardly the lessons that responsible teachers want their students to learn.

Nonetheless, this experience is common because many teachers still mistakenly believe that they must keep their assessments secret. As a result, students come to regard assessments as guessing games, especially from the middle grades on. They view success as depending on how well they can guess what their teachers will ask on quizzes, tests, and other assessments. Some teachers even take pride in their ability to out-guess students. They ask questions about isolated concepts or obscure understandings just to see whether students are reading carefully. Generally, these teachers don’t include such “gotcha” questions maliciously, but rather—often unconsciously—because such questions were asked of them when they were students.

Classroom assessments that serve as meaningful sources of information don’t surprise students. Instead, these assessments reflect the concepts and skills that the teacher emphasized in class, along with the teacher’s clear criteria for judging students’ performance. These concepts, skills, and criteria align with the teacher’s instructional activities and, ideally, with state or district standards. Students see these assessments as fair measures of important learning goals. Teachers facilitate learning by providing students with important feedback on their learning progress and by helping them identify learning problems (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981; Stiggins, 2002).

Critics sometimes contend that this approach means “teaching to the test.” But the crucial issue is, What determines the content and methods of teaching? If the test is the primary determinant of what teachers teach and how they teach it, then we are indeed “teaching to the test.” But if desired learning goals are the foundation of students’ instructional experiences, then assessments of student learning are simply extensions of those same goals. Instead of “teaching to the test,” teachers are more accurately “testing what they teach.” If a concept or skill is important enough to assess, then it should be important enough to teach. And if it is not important enough to teach, then there’s little justification for assessing it.
For Teachers
The best classroom assessments also serve as meaningful sources of information for teachers, helping them identify what they taught well and what they need to work on. Gathering this vital information does not require a sophisticated statistical analysis of assessment results. Teachers need only make a simple tally of how many students missed each assessment item or failed to meet a specific criterion. State assessments sometimes provide similar item-by-item information, but concerns about item security and the cost of developing new items each year usually make assessment developers reluctant to offer such detailed information. Once teachers have made specific tallies, they can pay special attention to the trouble spots—those items or criteria missed by large numbers of students in the class.

In reviewing these results, the teacher must first consider the quality of the item or criterion. Perhaps the question is ambiguously worded or the criterion is unclear. Perhaps students mis-interpreted the question. Whatever the case, teachers must determine whether these items adequately address the knowledge, understanding, or skill that they were intended to measure.

If teachers find no obvious problems with the item or criterion, then they must turn their attention to their teaching. When as many as half the students in a class answer a clear question incorrectly or fail to meet a particular criterion, it’s not a student learning problem—it’s a teaching problem. Whatever teaching strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn’t work.

Analyzing assessment results in this way means setting aside some powerful ego issues. Many teachers may initially say, “I taught them. They just didn’t learn it!” But on reflection, most recognize that their effectiveness is not defined on the basis of what they do as teachers but rather on what their students are able to do. Can effective teaching take place in the absence of learning? Certainly not.

Some argue that such a perspective puts too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on students. Occasionally, teachers respond, “Don’t students have responsibilities in this process? Shouldn’t students display initiative and personal accountability?”

Indeed, teachers and students share responsibility for learning. Even with valiant teaching efforts, we cannot guarantee that all students will learn everything excellently. Only rarely do teachers find items or assessment criteria that every student answers correctly. A few students are never willing to put forth the necessary effort, but these students tend to be the exception, not the rule. If a teacher is reaching fewer than half of the students in the class, the teacher’s method of instruction needs to improve. And teachers need this kind of evidence to help target their instructional improvement efforts.

Follow Assessments With Corrective Instruction
If assessments provide information for both students and teachers, then they cannot mark the end of learning. Instead, assessments must be followed by high-quality, corrective instruction designed to remedy whatever learning errors the assessment identified (see Guskey, 1997). To charge ahead knowing that students have not learned certain concepts or skills well would be foolish. Teachers must therefore follow their assessments with instructional alternatives that present those concepts in new ways and engage students in different and more appropriate learning experiences.
High-quality, corrective instruction is not the same as reteaching, which often consists simply of restating the original explanations louder and more slowly. Instead, the teacher must use approaches that accommodate differences in students’ learning styles and intelligences (Sternberg, 1994). Although teachers generally try to incorporate different teaching approaches when they initially plan their lessons, corrective instruction involves extending and strengthening that work. In addition, those students who have few or no learning errors to correct should receive enrichment activities to help broaden and expand their learning. Materials designed for gifted and talented students provide an excellent resource for such activities.

Developing ideas for corrective instruction and enrichment activities can be difficult, especially if teachers believe that they must do it alone, but structured professional development opportunities can help teachers share strategies and collaborate on teaching techniques (Guskey, 1998, 2000b). Faculty meetings devoted to examining classroom assessment results and developing alternative strategies can be highly effective. District-level personnel and collaborative partnerships with local colleges and universities offer wonderful resources for ideas and practical advice.

Occasionally, teachers express concern that if they take time to offer corrective instruction, they will sacrifice curriculum coverage. Because corrective work is initially best done during class and under the teacher’s direction, early instructional units will typically involve an extra class period or two. Teachers who ask students to complete corrective work independently, outside of class, generally find that those students who most need to spend time on corrective work are the least likely to do so.

As students become accustomed to this corrective process and realize the personal benefits it offers, however, the teacher can drastically reduce the amount of class time allocated to such work and accomplish much of it through homework assignments or in special study sessions before or after school. And by not allowing minor errors to become major learning problems, teachers better prepare students for subsequent learning tasks, eventually need less time for corrective work (Whiting, Van Burgh, & Render, 1995), and can proceed at a more rapid pace in later learning units. By pacing their instructional units more flexibly, most teachers find that they need not sacrifice curriculum coverage to offer students the benefits of corrective instruction.

**Give Second Chances to Demonstrate Success**

To become an integral part of the instructional process, assessments cannot be a one-shot, do-or-die experience for students. Instead, assessments must be part of an ongoing effort to help students learn. And if teachers follow assessments with helpful corrective instruction, then students should have a second chance to demonstrate their new level of competence and understanding. This second chance helps determine the effectiveness of the corrective instruction and offers students another opportunity to experience success in learning.

Writing teachers have long recognized the many benefits of a second chance. They know that students rarely write well on an initial attempt. Teachers build into the writing process several opportunities for students to gain feedback on early drafts and then to use that feedback to revise and improve their writing. Teachers of other subjects frequently balk at the idea, however—mostly because it differs from their personal learning experiences.
Some teachers express concern that giving students a second chance might be unfair and that “life isn’t like that.” They point out that a surgeon doesn’t get a second chance to perform an operation successfully and a pilot doesn’t get a second chance to land a jumbo jet safely. Because of the very high stakes involved, each must get it right the first time.

But how did these highly skilled professionals learn their craft? The first operation performed by that surgeon was on a cadaver—a situation that allows a lot of latitude for mistakes. Similarly, the pilot spent many hours in a flight simulator before ever attempting a landing from the cockpit. Such experiences allowed them to learn from their mistakes and to improve their performance. Similar instructional techniques are used in nearly every professional endeavor. Only in schools do students face the prospect of one-shot, do-or-die assessments, with no chance to demonstrate what they learned from previous mistakes.

All educators strive to have their students become lifelong learners and develop learning-to-learn skills. What better learning-to-learn skill is there than learning from one’s mistakes? A mistake can be the beginning of learning. Some assessment experts argue, in fact, that students learn nothing from a successful performance. Rather, students learn best when their initial performance is less than successful, for then they can gain direction on how to improve (Wiggins, 1998).

Other teachers suggest that it’s unfair to offer the same privileges and high grades to students who require a second chance that we offer to those students who demonstrate a high level of learning on the initial assessment. After all, these students may simply have failed to prepare appropriately. Certainly, we should recognize students who do well on the initial assessment and provide opportunities for them to extend their learning through enrichment activities. But those students who do well on a second assessment have also learned well. More important, their poor performance on the first assessment may not have been their fault. Maybe the teaching strategies used during the initial instruction were inappropriate for these students, but the corrective instruction proved more effective. If we determine grades on the basis of performance and these students have performed at a high level, then they certainly deserve the same grades as those who scored well on their first try.

A comparable example is the driver’s license examination. Many individuals do not pass their driver’s test on the first attempt. On the second or third try, however, they may reach the same high level of performance as others did on their first. Should these drivers be restricted, for instance, to driving in fair weather only? In inclement weather, should they be required to pull their cars over and park until the weather clears? Of course not. Because they eventually met the same high performance standards as those who passed on their initial attempt, they receive the same privileges. The same should hold true for students who show that they, too, have learned well.

**Similar Situations**

Using assessments as sources of information, following assessments with corrective instruction, and giving students a second chance are steps in a process that all teachers use naturally when they tutor individual students. If the student makes a mistake, the teacher stops and points out the mistake. The teacher then explains that concept in a different way. Finally, the teacher asks another question or poses a similar problem to ensure the
The challenge for teachers is to use their classroom assessments in similar ways to provide all students with this sort of individualized assistance.

Successful coaches use the same process. Immediately following a gymnast’s performance on the balance beam, for example, the coach explains to her what she did correctly and what could be improved. The coach then offers specific strategies for improvement and encourages her to try again. As the athlete repeats her performance, the coach watches carefully to ensure that she has corrected the problem.

Successful students typically know how to take corrective action on their own. They save their assessments and review the items or criteria that they missed. They rework problems, look up answers in their textbooks or other resource materials, and ask the teacher about ideas or concepts that they don’t understand. Less successful students rarely take such initiative. After looking at their grades, they typically crumple up their assessments and deposit them in the trash can as they leave the classroom. Teachers who use classroom assessments as part of the instructional process help all of their students do what the most successful students have learned to do for themselves.

The Benefits of Assessment

Using classroom assessment to improve student learning is not a new idea. More than 30 years ago, Benjamin Bloom showed how to conduct this process in practical and highly effective ways when he described the practice of mastery learning (Bloom, 1968, 1971). But since that time, the emphasis on assessments as tools for accountability has diverted attention from this more important and fundamental purpose.

Assessments can be a vital component in our efforts to improve education. But as long as we use them only as a means to rank schools and students, we will miss their most powerful benefits. We must focus instead on helping teachers change the way they use assessment results, improve the quality of their classroom assessments, and align their assessments with valued learning goals and state or district standards. When teachers’ classroom assessments become an integral part of the instructional process and a central ingredient in their efforts to help students learn, the benefits of assessment for both students and teachers will be boundless.

References


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Making Standards Work

Thomas R. Guskey

For all the debate about the standards movement in political circles, think tanks and the op-ed pages of daily newspapers, most educators welcome the idea.

By providing consensus about what’s important for students to learn and what skills they should acquire, standards give direction to reform initiatives. They also bring much-needed focus to curriculum development efforts and provide the impetus for new forms of student assessment.

To realize the benefits of standards, however, educational leaders must keep in mind three essential principles.

Principle No. 1: The ideas are more important than the vocabulary we use.

Many educators today are embroiled in a war of words that engenders passionate arguments and long debates. These arguments also squander precious time and detract from the important work that needs to be done.

I became aware of this war several years ago when asked to facilitate the work of a school district’s ineffective curriculum development committee. I quickly discovered that the committee members were lost in a tangled thicket of terminology. Most of their time was spent in squabbles about whether particular concepts should be labeled “goals” or “objectives.”

My first action was to write this simple phrase on a sheet of paper: “The student will be able to . . .” I then added a popular, performance-based verb, such as “demonstrate,” and completed the statement with some elements of content. I asked the group to read this statement and tell me if it was a(n): a. Goal, b. Objective, c. Outcome, d. Competency, e. Standard, f. Proficiency, g. Performance, h. Expectation, I. Aspiration or j. New Year’s Resolution.

The resulting debate took up most of the next hour. Yet when I took my statement to the high school cafeteria where students were having lunch and asked 10 students the same question, each gave me the same immediate answer: “Who cares?”

Educators must be clear about what they expect students to learn and be able to do. It is also crucial to decide what evidence best reflects that learning. In the long run, however, the label we attach to those things is unimportant. To the degree that distinctions in terminology are helpful and provide clarification, they should be used. But the confusion and distraction that such distinctions often cause must be avoided. Being clear about what we want students to learn is far more important than the specific vocabulary we use to describe those things.
Dust-Free Frameworks

Principle No. 2: Good ideas can be implemented poorly or not at all.

The end product of nearly all efforts to clarify educational goals is a document typically labeled a curriculum framework or set of learning standards. In most cases, these documents are bound in large notebooks, color-coded by level and distributed to teachers. Although they may be the pride of curriculum directors, how—or even whether—these frameworks are used is rarely considered.

If curriculum frameworks and learning standards are to make a difference in classroom practice and lead to improvements in students’ learning, we must give serious consideration to how they can be implemented practically and efficiently. Otherwise our latest efforts, like those of earlier decades, will end on a shelf gathering dust.

Implementation considerations should involve the difficult task of bridging the chasm between our goals and prevailing policies and practices. We must consider, for example, what types of professional development administrators and teachers will need to implement these new learning standards, what additional materials and resources will be required and how the effects of these efforts will be assessed and evaluated.

Regardless of the work that goes into clarifying our educational goals, their true value will depend directly on the quality of implementation.

Principle No. 3: Success hinges on what happens at the classroom level.

Studies of change convincingly show that success always hinges on what happens at the smallest unit of the organization. What this says to educational leaders is that successful improvement efforts will always hinge on what happens in the classroom, regardless of what occurs at the national, state or even district level.

As William Cooley recently lamented to a conference audience of the American Educational Research Association: “I have concluded that most educational reform takes place in our literature and on the pages of Education Week, not in schools and classrooms. . . . It seemed to me that all this talk about waves and waves of reforms really refers to trends in the reform literature, not changes that are really taking place in real schools.”

Improvement in education means more students learning better. The only level at which that generally takes place is in classrooms. Sadly, judged by the criterion of classroom impact, most educational reforms have a poor record of success. Even reforms that include development of high-level learning standards for students, paired with performance assessments on which teachers are held accountable for results, show relatively modest change in classroom practice; significant change is tied more directly to well-targeted, high-quality, ongoing, job-embedded professional development.

Efforts to clarify what students should learn and be able to do are vitally important. Such efforts provide essential focus and direction in reform initiatives at all levels. But to lead to significant
improvements in student learning, serious consideration must be given to the impact of these standards on classroom practice and the conditions necessary for change at that level.

**A Dynamic Process**

Clarifying our educational goals will never be easy. The process is enormously complex and often highly political. The dynamic nature of our society and the world also make it a continuously evolving process. The learning goals we establish today are unlikely to be adequate five years from now and will surely be antiquated 10 years hence.

Nevertheless, the process is essential to teaching and learning at all levels and, therefore, a task we must achieve. Investment in the principles described here will not make the process less challenging. It will ensure, however, that efforts remain focused on the issues most crucial to success.

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Deciding What’s Important to Learn
by Dr. Thomas Guskey, College of Education, University of Kentucky

When the standards movement began over a decade ago, most educators were ecstatic about the prospect of having clearly articulated student learning goals in the various subject areas. The release of the first set of standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 was greeted with unprecedented optimism. Standards such as these offered direction to reform initiatives by providing consensus about what is important for students to learn and what skills they should acquire. Standards also brought much needed focus to curriculum development efforts and provided the impetus for fashioning new forms of student assessment.

As other groups and professional organizations set about developing standards, however, they quickly discovered that the task was more difficult and more vexing than ever anticipated. Political and educational controversies posed major stumbling blocks. Turf issues and arguments about priorities hampered the best-intentioned efforts. Although significant progress has been made in nearly every subject area, it has not come easily and the results have not always been enthusiastically received.

Why is it so difficult to make decisions about our educational goals? Why do we find it so challenging at any level to get agreement about what students should learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school? What are the implications of these decisions for those who do the real work of education at the classroom level?

While there are no simple answers to these questions, I believe many of the difficulties encountered in our efforts to find answers could be resolved if we recognized two important facts and then are guided in our actions by three crucial principles. The two facts clarify our task while the three principles provide a foundation for this important work and direct us toward results that will stand the test of time.
Fact #1: The importance of clear learning goals (standards) is not a new idea.

Many educators today believe the push to define standards and clarify learning goals is a recent phenomenon in education. The dominant educational theme of the 1990s was certainly to "get serious about standards" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). But the importance of well-defined learning goals has been recognized for decades— we just haven’t done much about it.

Over 50 years ago renowned educator Ralph W. Tyler (1949) stressed that prior to teaching anyone anything, two fundamental questions must be addressed: (1) What do I want my students to learn and be able to do?; and (2) What evidence would I accept to verify that learning? As Tyler put it,

If an educational program is to be planned and if efforts for continued improvement are to be made, it is necessary to have some conception of the goals being sought. These educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed and tests and examinations are prepared. All aspects of the educational program are really means to accomplish these basic educational purposes. (p. 3)

As logical as this seems, Tyler also pointed out that most curriculum decisions are not based on student learning. Instead, they are based on time. We tend to worry more about what content should be covered in the time available than we do about what students acquire. As a result, we cannot say with certainty what the graduates of our schools have learned and are able to do. All we know for sure, argued Tyler, is how much time they spent in the school environment.

Similarly at the college level, students typically must earn a specified number of credit-hours to attain their degree. Credit-hours are earned by accumulating "contact-hours," defined as contact between students and their professors. From Tyler's perspective, however, credit-hours more accurately reflected contact between students and their seats.

Tyler further argued that the best indicators of teachers' effectiveness are based not on what teachers do, but on what students are able to do. In other words, teaching and learning must be seen as intrinsically linked. For a teacher to suggest, "I taught it to them, they just didn’t learn it." was to Tyler as foolish as saying, "I sold it to them, they just didn’t buy it." It was like saying, "I taught this fellow to swim, even though each time he jumps in the water he still sinks." Tyler emphasized that teaching is not something one can go off, alone into the wilderness, and do—not even if curriculum guides, textbooks, and lesson plans are carried along!

Obviously, the importance of defining our goals and identifying how those goals will be assessed has been recognized for many years. These are not new ideas. To improve our success in education, however, we must commit ourselves to making these decisions and following them through.

Fact #2: The goals we choose reflect our philosophy of schooling.

A major reason defining our educational goals is so difficult is that those involved in the task often hold different philosophies of schooling. These philosophies reflect not only what we value as individuals, but also what we hope for and value as a society. When philosophies differ, the goals being sought differ as well. Again, Ralph Tyler (1949) pointed out:
A fundamental first step in the process of defining our educational goals is to make our philosophies of schooling clear. Should the school develop young people to fit into the present society as is or does the school have a revolutionary mission to develop young people who will seek to improve the society? How these questions are answered affects the educational objectives we select. If the school believes its primary function is to teach people to adjust to society, it will strongly emphasize obedience to the present authorities, loyalty to the present forms and traditions, skills in carrying on the present techniques of life. Whereas if it emphasizes the revolutionary function of the school it will be more concerned with critical analysis, the ability to meet new problems, independence and self-direction, freedom, and self-discipline. (pp.35-36).

Philosophical conflicts about how traditional or revolutionary schools should be are at the root of many current debates regarding standards and learning goals. If we are going to move ahead in these efforts, we must make these differences clear and work toward meaningful compromise. Only then can some measure of consensus among differing philosophical perspectives be achieved.

Having acknowledged the vital importance of clear standards and the need to recognize and resolve our philosophical differences, we are ready to consider a plan for action. The following three principles provide direction for that important work. Keeping these principles in mind will not only help focus our efforts, it will prevent distraction from peripheral issues that divert attention and waste valuable resources.

Principle #1: The ideas are more important than the vocabulary we use.

Many educators today are engaged in a war of words. This war involves a tangled thicket of terminology that few teachers understand and neither students nor their parents comprehend. Arguments about differences between these words evoke great passion and often lead to long debates. Sadly, these arguments also squander precious time and detract from the important work that needs to be done.

A few years ago, for example, I was asked to facilitate the work of a school district's curriculum development committee that had stalled in its efforts to design a district-wide curriculum. I quickly discovered what prevented committee members from making progress in their work were squabbles over terminology. These thoughtful, dedicated, and highly knowledgeable educators spent most of their time arguing about whether the things they were generating were "goals" or "objectives."

To help them avoid continued frustration, I wrote a simple statement on a single sheet of paper. My statement began with the phrase, "The student will be able to..." I've always been fond of this phrase and wish I'd copyrighted it at some point. I then added a popular, high level, performance-based verb, such as "demonstrate," and completed the statement with some elements of content. I then showed my statement to the group and suggested they consider it a simple, multiple-choice question. "Please read this statement," I asked, "and tell me, is this statement a(n):

a. Goal f. Competency
b. Objective g. Proficiency
c. Standard h. Performance
d. Outcome i. Expectation
e. Benchmark j. New Year's Resolution?
The resulting debate proved to be far more serious than I ever imagined and took up most of the next hour. So I left the room, carrying my statement to the cafeteria where students were having lunch, and asked ten different high school students the same question. Unlike the teachers and school administrators on the curriculum development committee who had great difficulty reaching consensus, every student gave me the same answer: "Who cares?"

It's vitally important that educators be clear about what they expect students to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school. It's also crucial that decisions be made about what evidence best reflects that learning. In the long run, however, the label we attach to those things is unimportant. To the degree distinctions in terminology are helpful and an aide in the clarification process, they should be used. But the confusion and distraction that such distinctions often cause must be avoided. Being clear about what we want students to learn and be able to do is far more important than the particular vocabulary we use to describe those things.

Principle #2: Good ideas can be implemented poorly or not at all.

The end product of nearly all efforts to clarify educational goals is a document or series of documents typically labeled a "curriculum framework" or "set of learning standards." In most cases these documents are bound in large notebooks, color-coded by level, and printed with large type so they can be easily read. They are distributed to teachers at the appropriate grade levels and are the pride of school district and state curriculum directors. Whether or not they're used as intended, adapted appropriately, or ever used at all, is rarely considered.

If modern curriculum frameworks and learning standards are to make a difference in classroom practice and lead to improvements in student learning, we must give serious consideration to their implementation. In the absence of a focus on implementation, it's likely these documents will end up in the same place as the curriculum guides developed in the 1970's. They, too, were carefully designed, color-coded by level, and used large print. But because little attention was paid to how they could be practically and efficiently used, most teachers looked at them briefly, then put them into desk drawers or on book shelves where they did little more than gather dust, and continued to teach using whatever textbooks and materials were available.

An essential aspect in the design of any curriculum is consideration of how it will be implemented (Joyce, 1993). This involves the difficult task of bridging the sometimes wide and deep chasm between the goals we set and prevailing policies and practices. We must consider, for example, what types of professional development teachers and school administrators will need to understand and implement these new educational goals. We
need to determine what additional materials and resources will be required. We also must consider how the effects of these efforts will be assessed and evaluated. Regardless of the work that goes into the clarification of our educational goals, the true value of this work will depend directly on the quality of its implementation.

Principle #3: Success hinges on what happens at the classroom level.

Studies of change convincingly show that success in any change effort always hinges on what happens at the smallest unit of the organization (Senge, 1990). What this says to educators is that success in improvement efforts will always hinge on what happens at the classroom level. The hard lesson learned from analyses of the various waves of education reform is that it doesn’t matter what happens at the national level, the state level, or even the district level. Unless change takes place at the school building and classroom levels, improvement is unlikely. As Colley (1997) lamented:

I have concluded that most educational reform takes place in our literature and on the pages of Education Week, not in schools and classrooms. ...It seemed to me that all this talk about waves and waves of reforms really refers to trends in the reform literature, not changes that are really taking place in real schools. Of course, that’s true of waves. They tend to be highly visible at the surface, but do not affect what’s going on down in the lower depths. (p. 18).

Improvement in education means simply more students learning better, and the only level at which that generally takes place is in classrooms. Sadly, judged by the criterion of classroom impact, most educational reforms have a poor record of success (Sarason, 1990). Even reforms that include the development of higher level learning standards for students paired with performance assessments on which teachers are held accountable for results, changes in classroom practice remain relatively modest (Guskey, 1994). Significant change at the classroom level is tied more directly to the provision of on-going, job-embedded, high quality professional development (Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Lieberman, 1995).

Efforts to clarify what students should learn and be able to do and how they should act as a result of their experiences in school are vitally important. Such efforts provide essential focus and direction in reform initiatives at all levels. But clearly specified goals are just the first step in the improvement process. If our efforts to clarify learning goals are to lead to the significant improvements in student learning for which they are intended, serious consideration must be given to the intended impact on classroom practices and the conditions necessary for change at that level.

Conclusion

Clarifying our educational goals will never be easy. The process is enormously complex and highly political, especially when it involves individuals with different world views that reflect divergent philosophies of education. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of our society and the world, it is a continuously evolving process. The learning goals we establish today are unlikely to be adequate five years from now and will surely be antiquated ten years hence. As Ralph Tyler emphasized, however, it is a process that is essential to teaching and learning at all levels and, therefore, a task we must achieve. Attending to the facts and principles described here will not make the process less challenging. It will, however, ensure that efforts remain focused on the issues most crucial to success.

References available upon request.
Twenty Questions? Twenty Tools for Better Teaching

As long as tests and assessments are used only as means to document student achievement, their most powerful benefits will be missed: helping teachers identify their strengths, recognize their weaknesses, and target efforts to improve the quality of their teaching.

By Thomas R. Guskey

Most of us can recall depressing experiences with tests from our years as students. One of the most memorable for me occurred during my sophomore year in high school. I spent hours studying for a test that was a major portion of my grade in a particular course. I entered the classroom on the day of the test feeling confident that I was adequately prepared. However, when the teacher handed out the test and I read through it, panic overcame me, "Oh my gosh," I thought, "This isn't what I studied!" Despite my many hours of preparation, I did poorly on the test and received a low course grade.

This experience taught me two things. First, hard work and effort really don't pay off in certain high school classes. Neither my hours of preparation nor what I had learned were reflected in my test score. Given the nature of that test, I probably could have attained a comparable score with only a fraction of the preparation time.

Second, it taught me that some high school teachers can't be trusted. Doing well in their courses wasn't determined by how much I learned; it was determined by how well I could anticipate what they would ask on tests. The key to a high grade, therefore, was not to study what I perceived as important or even to study what was stressed in the text. The key was to guess what that particular teacher thought was important.

From that point on, I succeeded in my classes to the degree that I was able to outguess my teachers. I learned their game and I played it well. Occasionally, my efforts were thwarted by teachers who took pride in their ability to outguess their students. Their tests were "guinea pig" experiences that assigned some students to failure and frustrated all. I presumed they did this because it had been done to them—an unconscious way of passing on a harmful tradition.

Happily, such practices are rarer today. As the quality of teaching has improved, so has the way educators prepare tests and assessments. Students are seldom surprised by the questions they are asked, and most judge the tests and assessments their teachers administer to be fair measures of what they have learned. The best tests and assessments facilitate students' learning by providing essential feedback about their learning progress, helping them identify their learning problems, and offering guidance and direction for...

Principal Leadership, 1(3), 5-7.
correction those problems (Bloom, Madaus, and Hastings 1981).

Despite these improvements, how-
ever, most high school teachers do not take advantage of assessments as tools to improve their teaching. Teachers must view the results from their assessments in ways that help them identify what was taught well and what needs refinement or revision.

Analyzing Assessment Results

An easy but effective way to use tests and assessments to improve teaching is to conduct a simple analysis of each test item or criterion used to evaluate a paper, performance, or demonstration. A tally of how many students missed each item or failed to meet a particular criterion will identify the trouble spots. Special attention should be paid to those items or criteria missed by half or more of the students in the class.

The first thing to consider in such cases is the quality of the item or criterion itself. In other words, the teacher must determine whether the problem rests with the assessment tool. Perhaps the question is ambiguously worded. Perhaps the criterion is unclear. Perhaps students misinterpreted what the teacher wanted.

Whatever the case, teachers must look carefully at those items or criteria to see whether they adequately address the knowledge, the understanding, or the skill they intended to measure.

If no obvious problems are found in the test items or assessments criteria, teachers must be willing to turn to their teaching. If half the students in a class miss a clear and concise question about a concept that was taught, apparently that concept wasn’t taught very well. Whatever strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn’t work. When half the students in the class answer a question incorrectly or fail to meet a particular criterion, it’s not a student-learning problem—it’s a teaching problem.

Analyzing test or assessment results in this way means setting aside some powerful ego issues. Teachers’ initial response after identifying the items or the criteria missed by the majority of students is often, “Well, I taught them. They just didn’t learn it!” But on further reflection, most recognize that effectiveness in teaching is not defined by what they do as teachers. Rather, it is defined by what their students are able to do. If few students learn what is taught, can we really say that the teaching was effective? Can effective teaching take place in the absence of learning?

Renowned educator Ralph W. Tyler (1949) argued that it could not. Tyler maintained that asserting “I taught them, they just didn’t learn it” is as foolish as saying, “I sold it to them, they just didn’t buy it.” Imagine how ridiculous it would sound for a coach to say, “I taught this person how to swim. It’s not my fault if each time he jumps in the water he still sinks.” To Tyler, the best and most defensible criterion of teaching effectiveness is student learning. If few students learn, Tyler argued, how could anyone reasonably contend that effective teaching had occurred?

Predicting What Works

Many teachers are astonished to learn that they can be poor judges of what worked and what didn’t work in their teaching. In my own teaching, I am often taken by surprise. There have been times when I thought my presentations in class were truly inspired. My delivery was animated, my examples clear, and my insights truly effective. I could see that all the class, I regretted that I wasn’t being observed or videotaped, because it was truly one of my finest hours. Later, when I asked a question on a test or an assessment about the ideas or concepts I introduced during that sterling presentation, few students answered correctly. After squinting the initial impulse to blame my students, I realize that it is I who must make some changes.

Some might argue that such a perspective purrs too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on the students. Don’t students have significant responsibility in this process? Shouldn’t students, especially at the high school level, be expected to display initiative and personal accountability? And besides, “if they don’t get it, that’s their fault, not mine. I’m here to teach and they’re here to learn.”

Indeed, responsibility for learning is shared. Even the most valiant teaching efforts cannot guarantee that all students will learn excellently. Rarely do teachers find a test item or assessment criterion that is answered correctly by each one of their students. There are always those students who don’t care enough or who are unwilling to put forth the effort necessary for success. However, if a teacher is teaching less than half of the students in the class, the problem isn’t the student. It’s the teacher’s.

Finding Ways To Improve

Finding ways to improve teaching once trouble spots are identified can be difficult, especially if teachers believe they have to do it alone. Fortunately, they don’t.

Every school has excellent teachers who inspire their students and teach well. These outstanding teachers are usually more than willing to share their strategies and techniques. But structured professional development opportunities for such reflection and
The following practices will help principals provide leadership that encourages teachers to use classroom assessments to improve their teaching:

1. Emphasize the use of classroom assessments as learning tools that are part of the instructional process rather than as evaluation devices used solely to document student achievement.
2. Regularly review classroom assessment results with teachers to identify potential instructional problems. The sooner problems are identified, the sooner steps can be taken to remedy them.
3. Provide opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively, discuss students' assessment results and work to improve in areas of difficulty, and develop shared strategies for improvement.
4. Coordinate the assistance of central office and university personnel to help with improvement initiatives. Develop working partnerships with outside agencies to provide valuable information and access to resources that may not otherwise be available.
5. Review assessment results and take special note of improvement. Recognizing success encourages interest and often stimulates motivation for further improvements.

References

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The Rest of the Story

Thomas R. Guskey

The power of formative classroom assessment depends on how you use the results.

Radio commentator Paul Harvey gained widespread fame by reporting factual stories with a twist at the end. What he called "the rest of the story" typically gave the report entirely new meaning, leaving listeners surprised but well informed. Were Harvey to report on the use of formative classroom assessments, he undoubtedly would describe how increasing numbers of educators today consider these regular checks on learning progress to be an integral part of the instructional process. He would point out that well-designed formative assessments can provide students with essential feedback and inform teachers about the quality of their teaching by identifying concepts that students have and haven't mastered (Guskey, 2003; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The rest of the story, however, would be that formative assessments alone do little to improve student learning or teaching quality. What really counts is what happens after the assessments. Just as regularly checking your blood pressure does little to improve your health if you do nothing with the information gained, what matters most with formative assessments is how students and teachers use the results. Unfortunately, many educators today overlook this vital aspect of formative assessment. And by missing "the rest of the story," they fail to produce the most valuable benefits of the formative assessment process.

An Old Idea Reborn

The importance of using classroom assessments as learning tools was identified more than 35 years ago by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues in *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning* (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971). They described the benefits of offering students regular feedback on their learning progress through formative classroom assessments. As the name implies, formative assessments are designed to inform (see Scriven, 1967). They pinpoint for both students and teachers what concepts and skills have been learned well and what learning problems still exist.

Bloom and his colleagues stressed, however, that to improve student learning these regular progress checks must provide feedback (identifying students' individual learning difficulties) and be followed up with correctives (specific remediation strategies). Such procedures are precisely what make individual tutoring so effective. When a student being tutored makes a mistake, the tutor points out the error and immediately provides further explanation and clarification. Academically successful students typically initiate their own feedback and correctives: They follow up on the mistakes they make on quizzes and tests, seeking further information and greater understanding so that they do not repeat their learning errors. Most students, however, need a more structured classroom corrective process to help them use formative assessment results to improve their mastery of the concepts and skills.
Bloom and his colleagues further emphasized that correctives will be effective only if they are qualitatively different from the original instruction. Having students repeat a process that has already proven unsuccessful is unlikely to yield any better results the second time around. Effective corrective activities provide students with alternative pathways to learning success, adapted to meet their individual learning needs and interests (see Duffy & Kear, 2007).

**Planning Corrective Activities**

Effective corrective activities possess three essential characteristics (see Guskey, 1997). First, they present the concepts differently. For example, if a language arts unit initially taught the use of metaphors in poetry with a deductive approach (presenting the general concept and then giving specific examples), the corrective activity might use an inductive approach (presenting a variety of specific examples and building an understanding of the general concept from these examples). The best corrective activities involve a change in format, organization, or method of presentation.

Second, effective corrective activities engage students differently in learning. They consider different learning styles or modalities (Given, 2000; Lawrence, 1997; Sternberg, 1994) or different forms of intelligence (Armstrong, 2000; Gardner, 2006; Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2000). If science students initially learned about cell structure through a group activity, for example, a good corrective might involve an individual activity, such as reviewing an informative Web site and then using the computer to write and illustrate a report. If students originally learned the events of the American Revolutionary War in social studies by reading passages in their textbook and studying wall maps and charts (visual intelligence), a useful corrective might employ a group discussion of the events (auditory and interpersonal intelligence). To make a corrective strategy effective, students' engagement in learning must be qualitatively different from what took place during the initial instruction.

Finally, effective corrective activities provide students with successful learning experiences. If an activity does not help students overcome their learning difficulties and experience success, the teacher should abandon it for another option. Corrective experiences should make students better prepared, more confident, and more motivated for future learning tasks.

The best ideas for effective corrective activities generally come from fellow teachers. Teaching colleagues often can offer new ways of presenting concepts, different examples, and alternative materials. Professional development opportunities that provide teachers with time for such sharing reduce the workload of individual teachers and typically yield higher-quality activities (Guskey, 1998, 2000). Faculty meetings devoted to examining classroom assessment results and developing corrective strategies also work well. Such meetings also might involve district-level personnel or content experts from local colleges and universities.

**Types of Corrective Activities**

Many teachers find it useful to organize corrective activities into three groups: those to be done with the teacher, those to be done with a friend, and those to be done by oneself (see fig. 1). Although any particular activity may fall into more than one category, every activity should be designed to provide students with a different presentation and mode of engagement. Most teachers plan several types of corrective activities for each instructional unit to give students some choice and to accommodate a wider variety of learning styles and modalities. Further, if a particular activity falls flat, having several activities planned makes it possible to turn to another immediately without wasting valuable time. These are a few corrective activities that many teachers find to be effective:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corrective Activity</th>
<th>With the Teacher</th>
<th>With a Friend</th>
<th>By Oneself</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reteaching</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Tutoring</td>
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<td>Peer Tutoring</td>
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<td>Cooperative Teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course Textbooks</td>
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<td>Alternative Textbooks</td>
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<td>Workbooks and Study Guides</td>
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<td>Academic Games</td>
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<td>Learning Kits</td>
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<td>Learning Centers and Laboratories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer Activities</td>
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**Figure 1. How to Use Corrective Activities**

**Reteaching**

The simplest and most frequently used corrective activity involves reteaching. The teacher, or another teacher in team-teaching situations, explains difficult concepts again using a different approach or different examples. Most teachers use reteaching as they review the results from formative assessments with students, reexplaining concepts that many students misunderstood or found difficult, before turning to other types of corrective activities.
The greatest challenge with reteaching, of course, is ensuring that it involves a truly different presentation and level of engagement. When reteaching a difficult concept, some teachers simply restate their original explanation louder and more slowly, perhaps believing that increased volume and a slower pace are what some students need. This approach seldom works.

**Individual Tutoring**

One of the most effective corrective activities is individual tutoring. In most cases, the tutor goes through the formative assessment with the student, explaining concepts that the student missed in a new way or from a different perspective, continually checking for understanding as they move along. Even teachers who employ other forms of correctives usually monitor students’ understanding with some individual tutoring, especially for those students with more serious learning difficulties. Many teachers have obtained excellent results using older students, teacher’s aides, and classroom volunteers as tutors (Topping & Bryce, 2004; Wright & Cleary, 2006). Regardless of who serves as the tutor, individual tutoring consistently ranks among the most efficient and most powerful types of corrective activity.

**Peer Tutoring**

Students who have already mastered the important concepts and skills in the unit often make excellent tutors for their classmates. Like other tutors, peers typically explain concepts from a different perspective or in a different way (Kourea, Cartledge, & Musti-Rao, 2007). In addition, research indicates that students who serve as peer tutors generally benefit as much as the students they assist (Medcalf, Glynn, & Moore, 2004). Helping classmates understand new concepts or master new skills often deepens their own understanding. Most teachers find, however, that peer tutoring is best presented as one of several corrective options from which students can choose. Requiring two mismatched students to work together can be counterproductive.

**Cooperative Teams**

In cooperative teams, three to five students get together to discuss their learning gaps and to help one another. The teams are heterogeneous, assigned by the teacher, and usually stay intact for several learning units. During the corrective session, students review the formative assessment item by item. Any question or crucial element that one or more students have missed is explained by another team member who understands it. If all members of the team are having difficulty, they can work collaboratively to find a solution or call on the teacher for assistance. With modest direction and supervision, cooperative teams can be a highly effective corrective activity at any level of education (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Slavin, 1991).

**Textbooks**

Another simple but highly effective corrective is to have students reread relevant sections in the textbook. Rereading is especially effective when combined with other activities, such as having students write a short paragraph explaining the concept in their own words. Teachers who use the textbook as a corrective resource typically list page-number references beside each item or problem on the formative assessment so that students can turn directly to the relevant sections or examples. Although referring students to the textbook may seem to be repetition of the same old thing, focusing students’ attention on specific passages often helps them recognize or clarify important concepts and information they missed in their initial reading.
Alternative Textbooks

When available, alternative textbooks often provide a different presentation or explanation of crucial ideas or concepts. Many teachers save several copies of their old textbooks when a new one is adopted to offer students an additional source of information. Other teachers use alternative textbooks to provide additional practice exercises, examples, or problems.

Alternative Materials, Workbooks, and Study Guides

Alternative materials include videotapes, audiotapes, DVDs, hands-on materials, manipulative models, Web-based resources, and so forth. Because workbooks and study guides usually present ideas and concepts in a different way from textbooks and often include examples or practical applications, they can provide excellent corrective activities for a wide range of student learning styles. In addition, the variety of presentation formats allows the teacher to choose appropriate materials that the student can use with the teacher, with a friend, or for working alone.

Academic Games

Most academic games consist of group activities in which students work together to solve a particular problem or accomplish a task that relates to specific learning goals (Harnadek, 1992; Larson, 2002). Many academic games can be adapted or modified to fit a variety of learning situations. Like cooperative teams, academic games typically promote cooperation and collaboration among students and can be a highly effective corrective activity.

Learning Kits

Learning kits usually present ideas and concepts visually and often involve the manipulation of materials. In addition, most kits can be used with the teacher, among a small group of students, or by a student working alone. Learning kits might include puzzles, learning tools, or other instructional materials. Many involve the use of models or manipulative materials; others are based on interactive multimedia content (Learning Kit Project, 2007). Although learning kits are widely available from commercial publishers and Web-based sources, many teachers assemble their own from materials they gather.

Learning Centers and Laboratories

Directing students to learning centers or learning laboratories in the classroom or in another part of the school often serves as a highly effective corrective activity. In these centers, students get help on their specific learning problems, often under the guidance of a learning supervisor or center aide. Center activities typically engage students in more hands-on and manipulative tasks than might have been possible during the initial instruction. Centers are most effective as a corrective when students are involved in a structured activity and receive a specific assignment to complete.

Computer Activities

Many teachers use computers and other forms of technology—including videodiscs, laser discs, interactive video, various forms of hypermedia, and a variety of powerful online resources—as a primary means of corrective activities. The highly versatile, user-friendly nature of technology makes it appropriate for almost any subject area and grade level. Computer activities enable students to work alone or in collaboration with classmates. Many tutorial programs also enable students to control the kind and amount of assistance they receive; this individualized interaction makes assistance potentially less embarrassing. When students
become familiar with a program’s operation, and when the software closely matches the learning goals, computer activities can be highly effective as a corrective (Dillon & Gabbard, 1998; Kumar, Greer, & McCalla, 2005; Perry, Thauberger, MacAllister, & Winne, 2005).

Planning for Enrichment Activities

On any given formative assessment, some students will demonstrate their mastery of unit concepts and skills on the first try and will have no need for corrective activities. Rather than sitting around, biding their time while other students relearn the material, these students need opportunities to extend their learning through enrichment activities.

Effective enrichment must provide valuable, challenging, and rewarding learning experiences. Students who master the learning objective the first time and perform well on the formative assessment should view enrichment activities positively—not simply as harder tasks or busywork. Rather than being narrowly restricted to the content of specific instructional units, enrichment activities should be broadly construed to cover a wide range of related topics.

Students should have some degree of choice in selecting enrichments. For example, if a learner has a special interest in some aspect of the subject, using enrichment time to prepare a report on that topic not only provides a unique learning opportunity but also enhances this student’s motivation to do well in subsequent formative assessments so that he or she can return to working on the report. Other examples of enrichment activities include challenging academic games and exercises, various multimedia projects, and peer tutoring.

Some creative teachers find it easy to develop different types of enrichment activities for their students. Others struggle to create such learning experiences. Besides consulting with colleagues, many teachers turn to materials designed for gifted and talented students as their primary resource for enrichment. Certain publishers focus specifically on activities that genuinely extend students’ learning by involving them in higher-order skills (for example, Critical Thinking Press and Software in Pacific Grove, California; Dale Seymour Publications in Palo Alto, California; and Thinking Works in St. Augustine, Florida). Further, the game-like nature of many of these activities motivates students to want to take part. Most teachers use class time in early instructional units to engage all students in enrichment activities, both to encourage participation and to enhance students’ motivation on future formative assessments.

Managing Corrective and Enrichment Activities

Mr. Tanabe is a typical 4th grade teacher whose class has just studied a two-week unit on multiplying and dividing fractions. He administers a 20- to 25-minute formative classroom assessment that he corrects with his students in class, reviewing each item and stopping occasionally to reexplain ideas or concepts that appear troublesome to most of the students. After completing the review, he reminds students that the mastery or proficiency standard is 80 percent correct.

He then divides students into two groups: those who attained the proficiency standard and those who did not. Students who demonstrated their proficiency can choose from various enrichment activities—including working with partners to write original word problems or doing a guided Web search to learn about a famous mathematician—or they may volunteer to serve as peer tutors. Those who did not reach proficiency begin their corrective work under the teacher’s direction. The cooperative teams that Mr. Tanabe has put into place move their desks together to begin working with their teammates.

Mr. Tanabe does three important things when dividing the class into separate corrective and enrichment groups. First, he recognizes students who attained the proficiency standard for their achievement. A quick show of hands followed by congratulations helps sustain these
students’ persistence in future learning units. Next, he reminds students that group membership is temporary and can change with every unit and every formative assessment. As students’ performance changes, so will the members of both corrective and enrichment groups. Finally, he emphasizes his confidence in the skills of those students who have not yet attained proficiency. He assures these students that with a little extra time and effort they too will reach the proficiency standard and will be well prepared to tackle upcoming units.

After starting the enrichment group on its activities, Mr. Tanabe turns his attention to the corrective group. He begins with reteaching, using some supplemental materials to present difficult ideas and concepts in a new and different way. He then moves to guided practice activities, leading students through structured problems or exercises. He includes practice time in which some students work independently to demonstrate their understanding and others work with peer tutors. As students work, he moves from student to student, asking questions and offering individualized assistance. At the same time, he checks on students engaged in enrichment activities, making sure they remain on task.

As this example shows, correctives rarely involve a single activity. In this case the teacher combined reteaching with alternative materials, guided practice, independent practice, and individual tutoring. When students work on their own or with a friend, most teachers require completion of a written assignment that summarizes their work. Enrichment activities may be similarly diversified, and many teachers require a tangible product from these students as well. After students become accustomed to the corrective and enrichment process, however, teachers often relax or eliminate this requirement.

**Finding Time**

Some teachers fear that taking time for corrective and enrichment activities in each instructional unit will lessen the amount of material they will be able to cover. They believe that as a result of sacrificing coverage to allow a higher level of learning, some students may learn better but all will learn less.

Corrective and enrichment activities initially do add time to instructional units. Especially in early units, these activities must be done in class, under the teacher’s direction, and typically require a class period or two. Teachers who ask students to complete correctives outside class as a homework assignment or during special study sessions held before or after school rarely experience success with this strategy. Instead, they quickly discover that those students who could benefit most from the corrective process are the least likely to take part.

After students become accustomed to the corrective process and realize its advantages, most teachers begin reducing the class time they allocate to correctives. They use more student-initiated activities and ask students to complete more of their corrective work outside class. As students remedy their learning problems in early units, they perform better on formative assessments in subsequent units. This improvement leads to more students becoming involved in enrichment activities and fewer students engaged in correctives. The amount of corrective work each student needs to reach the proficiency standard also diminishes (Whiting, Van Burgh, & Render, 1995).

Modest changes in instruction further lessen the extra time needed. Many teachers, for example, eliminate review sessions prior to formative assessments and shift that time to the corrective and enrichment process. With the results from the formative assessment, teachers can become more efficient in their review, concentrating on those concepts and skills that pose problems for students. In addition, by allowing fast learners to demonstrate their proficiency and move on to enrichment activities, teachers can spend their time working with a smaller group of students who need their assistance most.
In general, teachers do not need to sacrifice content coverage to implement corrective and enrichment activities, but they must be flexible in pacing their instruction. The time used for correctives and enrichment in early units yields powerful benefits that will make the pace of instruction faster later on. Teachers must keep in mind what the class needs to accomplish by the end of any learning sequence, but they also must see students' pathways to that end in more flexible and accommodating terms.

**Making Good Use of a Valuable Tool**

Formative classroom assessment offers educators a valuable tool to improve student learning. But to realize the true benefits of such assessment, we need to focus attention on what students and teachers do with the assessment results. To close achievement gaps and help all students learn well, educators must provide students with alternative pathways to learning success. Engaging students in diverse corrective activities or exciting and challenging enrichment activities, depending on their performance on well-designed formative assessments, offers the practical means to do just that.

And now you know ... the rest of the story.

**References**


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Good teachers can overcome effects of poverty on learning

By Thomas R. Guskey

Since its inception the Kentucky Education Reform Act has been based on one premise: All children can learn. Not just rich children, but poor ones too. And learn not just simple things, but a modern, challenging, problem-solving, academically oriented curriculum. No exceptions. No excuses. This premise guided development of all aspects of KEEA.

But now, some individuals in the Office of Education Accountability want to depart from that premise. They believe such a lofty goal may be unfair to schools and school districts that serve high proportions of poor children.

Their idea is that the goals for such schools should be “adjusted,” which means “lowered.” To support their belief, they point to evidence which shows the percent of poor children attending a school (those who qualify for free or reduced lunch benefits) can be used to predict that school’s results on the statewide assessments. And, after all, most schools don’t control the proportion of poor children who walk through their doors.

But this is nothing new. It was anticipated long before KEEA ever came about. In fact, it’s one of the reasons the reform was enacted. Recognizing what currently exists, however, is far different from accepting it as inevitable. And it certainly shouldn’t limit our aspirations.

Schools that serve high percentages of poor children face enormous challenges. They need lots of guidance and assistance, lots of resources, and extra time—the very things the reform is attempting to provide. They also need communities that value education and support improvement efforts. What they don’t need is lower expectations based on goals that are “adjusted”—and neither do their students.

Similar adjustments in any other area would be considered laughable. Would anyone, for example, recommend that schools serving poor students set their basketball goals at nine feet instead of 10? The very notion of changing the rules and lowering expectations just because these children are poor would be considered ridiculous. Is lowering our expectations for children’s learning any less so?

In schools throughout Kentucky, teachers are rising to the challenge of helping all students learn. Although many of their students come from disadvantaged homes, these teachers don’t allow that to stand in their way. Where others see limitations, they see possibilities. They don’t care about predictable results; they want to make a difference. They expect every one of their students to learn well, and do everything they can to make sure that happens. No exceptions. No excuses.

Teachers like this are probably not in the majority today. Some schools may not have any. But most schools have at least a few, and the difference they make is becoming evident. We found this to be true in a recent analysis of data from Fayette County, where the proportion of poor children in schools ranges from four to 94 percent. Results showed the percent of poor children attending a school could be used to predict initial results on statewide assessments. It did not, however, predict improvement. In other words, poverty may forecast where you start, but it has nothing to do with how much you can improve or how much better you can get.

The premise that “all children can learn” is not easy to accept, especially by those comfortable with status quo and predictable results. It was even the focus of a debate several years ago on the public television show, “Firing Line.” Mortimer Adler, an educator, was opposed by William F. Buckley, the commentator. During the program, Buckley challenged Adler, asking, “Are you sure all students can learn?”

Adler responded simply, “No. But I don’t believe you are sure all students can’t. And I prefer to live and work with my hope, rather than your doubt.”

There are teachers in Kentucky today who live, work and realize that hope. Let’s help them and help more teachers become like them. Let’s not be swayed by those who continue to live in doubt. No exceptions. No excuses.

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Making the Grade: What Benefits Students?

Thomas R. Guskey

Although the debate over grading and reporting practices continues, today we know which practices benefit students and encourage learning.

The Committee On Grading was called upon to study grading procedures. At first, the task of investigating the literature seemed to be a rather hopeless one. What a mess and a mess it all was! Could order be brought out of such chaos? Could points of agreement among American educators concerning the perplexing grading problem actually be discovered? It was with considerable skepticism and trepidation that the work was finally begun.

Few educators today would consider the difficulties encountered by Middleton and his colleagues to be particularly surprising. In fact, most probably would sympathize with his lament. What they might find surprising, however, is that this report from the Committee on Grading was published in 1933!

The issues of grading and reporting on student learning have perplexed educators for the better part of this century. Yet despite all the debate and the multitude of studies, coming up with prescriptions for best practice seems as challenging today as it was for Middleton and his colleagues more than 60 years ago.

Points of Agreement

Although the debate over grading and reporting continues, today we know better which practices benefit students and encourage learning. Given the multitude of studies—and their often incongruent results—researchers do appear to agree on the following points:

1. Grading and reporting aren't essential to instruction. Teachers don't need grades or reporting forms to teach well. Further, students don't need them to learn (Frisbie and Wultman 1992).

   Teachers do need to check regularly on how students are doing, what they've learned, and what problems or difficulties they've experienced. But grading and reporting are different from checking; they involve judging the adequacy of students' performance at a specific time. Typically, teachers use checking to diagnose and prescribe and use grading to evaluate and describe (Bloom et al. 1981).

   When teachers do both checking and grading, they become advocates as well as judges—roles that aren't necessarily compatible (Bishop 1992). Finding a meaningful compromise between these dual roles makes many teachers uncomfortable, especially those with a child-centered orientation (Barnes 1985).

2. No one method of grading and reporting serves all purposes well. Grading enables teachers to communicate the achievements of students to parents and others, provide incentives to learn, and provide information that students can use for self-evaluation. In addition, schools use grades to identify or group students for particular educational paths or programs and to evaluate a program's effectiveness (Feldheiser 1971, Frisbie and Waltman 1992). Unfortunately, many schools attempt to address all of these purposes with a single method and end up achieving none very well (Austin and McCann 1992).

Leter grades, for example, briefly describe learning progress and give some idea of its adequacy (Payne 1974). Their use, however, requires abstracting a great deal of information into a single symbol (Stiggins 1994). In addition, the cut-off between grade categories is always arbitrary and difficult to justify. If scores for a grade of B range from 80 to 89, students at both ends of that range receive the same grade, even though their scores differ by nine points. But the student with a score of 79—a one-point difference—receives a grade of C.

The more detailed methods also have their drawbacks. Narratives and checklists of learning outcomes offer specific information for documenting progress, but good narratives take time to prepare, and—not surprisingly—as teachers complete more narratives, their contents become increasingly standardized. From the parents' standpoint, checklists of learning outcomes often appear too complicated to understand. In addition, checklists seldom communicate the appropriateness of students' progress in relation to expectations for their level (AFTERBACH and Sammons 1991). Because one method won't adequately serve all purposes, schools must identify their primary purpose for grading and select or develop the most appropriate approach (Cangeli 1990). This process often involves the difficult task of seeking consensus among several constituencies.

3. Regardless of the method used, grading and reporting remains inherently subjective. In fact, the more detailed the reporting method and the more analytic the process, the more likely subjectivity will influence results (Ornstein 1994). That's why, for example, holistic scoring procedures tend to have greater reliability than analytic procedures.

Subjectivity in this process, however, isn't always bad. Because teachers know their students, understand various dimensions of students'
work, and have clear notions of the progress made, their subjective perceptions may yield very accurate descriptions of what students have learned (Bracken 1993, O'Donnell and Woolfolk 1991).

When subjectivity translates into bias, however, negative consequences can result. Teachers' perceptions of students' behavior can significantly influence their judgments of scholastic performance (Hills 1991). Students with behavior problems often have no chance to receive a high grade because their infractions overshadow their performance. These effects are especially pronounced in judgments of boys (Bennett et al. 1993). Even the neatness of students' handwriting can significantly affect a teacher's judgment (Sweedler-Brown 1992).

Training programs can help teachers identify and reduce these negative effects and lead to greater consistency in judgments (Aiferbach and Sammons 1991). Unfortunately, few teachers receive adequate training in grading or reporting as part of their professional preparation (Boothroyd and McMorris 1992). Also, few school districts provide adequate guidance to ensure consistency in teachers' grading or reporting practices (Austin and McCann 1992).

4. Grades have some value as rewards, but no value as punishments. Although educators would undoubtedly prefer that motivation to learn be entirely intrinsic, the existence of grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth (Chattain 1990, Ebel 1979). Most students view high grades as positive recognition of their success, and some work hard to avoid the consequences of low grades (Feldmesser 1971).

At the same time, no studies support the use of low grades as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades usually cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many students regard the low grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low mark, but feel helpless to improve (Selby and Murphy 1992).

Sadly, some teachers consider grades or reporting forms their "weapon of least resort." In their view, students who don't comply with requests suffer the consequences of the greatest punishment: a teacher can bestow a failing grade. Such practices have no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affect students, teachers, and the relationship they share. Rather than attempting to punish students with a low mark, teachers can better motivate students by regarding their work as incomplete and requiring additional effort.

5. Grading and reporting should always be done in reference to learning criteria, never on the curve. Using the normal probability curve as a basis for assigning grades typically yields greater consistency in grade distributions from one teacher to the next. The practice, however, is detrimental to teaching and learning.

Grading on the curve pits students against one another in a competition for the few rewards (high grades) distributed by the teacher. Under these conditions, students readily see that helping others will threaten their own chances for success (Johnson et al. 1979, Johnson et al. 1980). Learning becomes a game of winners and losers—with both students falling into the latter category (Johnson and Johnson 1989). In addition, modern research has shown that the seemingly direct relationship between aptitude or intelligence and school achievement depends upon instructional conditions, not a probability curve.

When the instructional quality is high and well matched to students' learning needs, the magnitude of this relationship diminishes drastically and approaches zero (Bloom 1976). Moreover, the fairness and equity of grading on the curve is a myth.
Learning Criteria
When grading and reporting relate to learning criteria, teachers have a clearer picture of what students have learned. Students and teachers alike generally prefer this approach because it seems fairer (Kowalski 1993). The types of learning criteria usually used for grading and reporting fall into three categories:

- **Product criteria** are favored by advocates of performance-based approaches to teaching and learning. These educators believe grading and reporting should communicate a summative evaluation of student achievement (Cangelosi 1990). In other words, they focus on what students know and are able to do at that time. Teachers who use product criteria often base their grades or reports exclusively on final examination scores, overall assessments, or other culminating demonstrations of learning.

- **Process criteria** are emphasized by educators who believe product criteria don’t provide a complete picture of student learning. From their perspective, grading and reporting should reflect not just the final results but also how students got there. Teachers who consider effort or work habits when reporting on student learning are using process criteria. So are teachers who take into consideration classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, or attendance.

- **Progress criteria**, often referred to as “improvement scoring” and “learning gain,” consider how much students have gained from their learning experiences. Teachers who use progress criteria look at how far students have come rather than where they are. As a result, scoring criteria may become highly individualized.

Teachers who base their grading and reporting procedures on learning criteria typically use some combination of the three types (Frye et al. 1993; Nava and Loyd 1992; Stiggins et al. 1989). Most researchers and measurement specialists, on the other hand, recommend using product criteria exclusively. They point out that the more process and progress criteria come into play, the more subjective and biased grades become (Ornstein 1994). How can a teacher know, for example, how difficult a task was for students or how hard they worked to complete it? If these criteria are included at all, most experts recommend they be reported separately (Stiggins 1994).

Practical Guidelines
Despite years of research, there’s no evidence to indicate that one grading or reporting method works best under all conditions, in all circumstances. But in developing practices that work to be fair, equitable, and useful to students, parents, and teachers, educators can rely on two guidelines:

- **Provide accurate and understandable descriptions of learning.** Regardless of the method or form used, grading and reporting should communicate effectively what students have learned, what they can do, and whether their learning status is in line with expectations for that level. More than an exercise in quantifying achievement, grading and reporting must be seen as a challenge in clear thinking and effective communication (Stiggins 1994).
- **Use grading and reporting methods to enhance, not hinder, teaching and learning.** A clear, easily understood reporting form facilitates communication between teachers and parents. When both parties speak the same language, joint efforts to help students are likely to succeed. But developing such an equitable and understandable system will require the elimination of long-time practices such as averaging and assigning a zero to work that’s late, missed, or neglected. Averaging 10% off the bottom of providing an accurate description of what students have learned. For example, students often say, “I have to get a B on the final to pass this course.” Such a comment illustrates the inappropriateness of averaging. If a final examination is truly comprehensive and students’ scores accu-
A Look Back at Grading Practices

Although student assessment has been a part of teaching and learning for centuries, grading is a relatively recent phenomenon. The ancient Greeks used assessments as formative, not evaluative, tools. Students demonstrated, usually orally, what they had learned, giving teachers a clear indication of which topics required more work or instruction. In the United States, grading and reporting were virtually unknown before 1800. Back then, most schools grouped students of all ages and backgrounds together with one teacher. Few students went beyond the elementary education offered in these one-room schoolhouses. As the country grew—and as legislators passed compulsory attendance laws—the number and diversity of students increased. Schools began to group students in grades according to their age, and to try new ideas about curriculum and teaching methods. Here’s a brief timeline of significant dates in the history of grading:

Late 1800s: Schools begin to issue progress evaluations. Teachers simply write down the skills that students have mastered; once students complete the requirements for one level, they can move to the next level.

Early 1900s: The number of public high schools in the United States increases dramatically. While elementary teachers continue using written descriptions to document student learning, high school teachers introduce percentages as a way to certify students’ accomplishments in specific subject areas. Few educators question the gradual shift to percentage grading, which seems a natural by-product of the increased demands on high school teachers.

1912: Starch and Elliott publish a study that challenges percentage grades as reliable measures of student achievement. They base their findings on grades assigned to two papers written for a first-year English class in high school. Of the 142 teachers grading on a 0 to 100 scale, 15 percent give one paper a failing mark; 12 percent give the same paper a score of 90 or more. The other paper receives scores ranging from 50 to 97. Neatness, spelling, and punctuation influenced the scoring of many teachers, while others considered how well the paper commun- icated its message.

1913: Responding to critics—who argue that good writing is, by nature, a highly subjective judgment—Starch and Elliott repeat their study but use geometry papers. Even greater variations occur, with scores on one paper ranging from 28 to 95. Some teachers deducted points only for wrong answers, but others took neatness, form, and spelling into account.

1918: Teachers turn to grading scales with fewer and larger categories. One three-point scale, for example, uses the categories of Excellent, Average, and Poor. Another has five categories (Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, and Failing) with the corresponding letters of A, B, C, D, and F (Johnson 1918, Rugg 1918).

1930s: Grading on the curve—"the increasingly popular as educators seek to minimize the subjective nature of scoring. This method ranks orders students according to some measure of their performance or proficiency. The top percentage receives an A, the next percentage receives a B, and so on (Corey 1930). Some advocates (Davis 1930) even specify the precise percentage of students to be assigned each grade, such as 92-2.44-2.2-2.44-6.

Grading on the curve seems fair and equitable, given research suggesting that students’ scores on tests of innate intelligence approximate a normal probabil- ity curve (Middletown 1933).

As the debate over grading and reporting intensifies, a number of schools abolish formal grades alto- gether (Champion and Ashbaugh 1925) and return to using verbal descriptions of student achievement. Others advocate a "mastery approach." Once students have mastered a skill or content, they move to other areas of study (Heck 1938, Hill 1935).

1958: Ellis Page investigates how student learning is affected by grades and teachers' comments. In a new classic study, 74 secondary school teachers administer a test, and assign a numerical score and letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F to each student’s paper. Next, teachers randomly divide the tests into three groups. Papers in the first group receive only the numerical score and letter grade. The second group, in addition to the score and grade, receive these standard comments: A—Excellent! B—Good work. Keep it at C—Perhaps try to do still better? D—Let’s bring this up. F—Let’s raise this grade! For the third group, teachers mark the score and letter grade, and write individualized comments.

Page evaluates the effects of the comments by considering students' scores on the next test they take. Results show that students in the second group achieved significantly higher scores than those who received only a score and grade. The students who received individualized comments did even better. Page concludes that grades can have a beneficial effect on student learning, but only when accom- panied by specific or individualized comments from the teacher.

—Thomas R. Guskey

learning. The teacher certain the student has learned absolutely nothing, or is the zero assigned to punish students for not displaying appropriate responsibility. (Majors & Hachick 1989, Siggins and Duke 1991.)

Further, a zero has a profound effect when combined with the practice of averaging. Olympic events such as gymnastics and ice skating eliminate the highest and lowest scores; otherwise, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores. An alternative is to use the median score rather than the average (Wright 1994), but use of the most current information remains the most defensible option.

Meeting the Challenge

The issues of grading and reporting on student learning continue to challenge educators today, just as they challenged Midddleton and his colleagues in 1933. But today we know more than ever before about the complexities involved and how certain practices can influence teaching and learning.

What do educators need to develop grading and reporting practices that provide quality information about student learning? Nothing less than clear thinking, careful planning, excellent communication skills, and an overriding concern for the well-being of students. Combining these skills with our current knowledge on effective practice will surely result in more efficient and more effective reporting.

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Helping Standards Make the GRADE

When reporting on student work, educators need a clear, comprehensive grading system that shows how students are measuring up to standards.

Thomas R. Guskey

The issue of grading looms on the horizon for standards-based education. With standards and assessments now in place, educators face the daunting task of how best to grade and report student learning in terms of those standards. Most educators recognize the inadequacies of their current grading and reporting methods (Marzano, 2000). Few, however, have found alternatives that satisfy the diverse needs of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members.

Standards don’t lessen the responsibility of educators to evaluate the performance of students and to report the results. Nevertheless, the focus on standards poses unique challenges in grading and reporting. What are those challenges, and how can educators develop standards-based grading and reports that are accurate, honest, and fair?

Criterion-Referenced Standards

The first challenge is moving from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced grading standards. *Norm-referenced* standards compare each student’s performance to that of other students in the group or class. Teachers first rank students on some measure of their achievement or performance. They assign a set percentage of top-rated students (usually 10 to 20 percent) the highest grade, a second set percentage (perhaps 20 to 30 percent) the second highest grade, and so on. The percentages typically correspond to an approximation of the bell-shaped, normal probability curve, hence the expression “grading on the curve.” Most adults experienced this type of grading during their school days.

*Criterion-referenced* standards, in contrast, compare each student’s performance to clearly stated performance descriptions that differentiate levels of quality. Teachers judge students’ performance by what each student does, regardless of how well or poorly their classmates perform.

Using the normal probability curve as a basis for assigning grades yields highly consistent grade distributions from one teacher to the next. All teachers’ classes have essentially the same percentages of As, Bs, and Cs. But the consequences for students are overwhelmingly negative. Learning becomes highly competitive because students must compete against one another for the few high grades that the teacher distributes. Under these conditions, students see that helping others threatens their own chances for success. Because students do not achieve high grades by performing well, but rather by doing better than their classmates, 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 & 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).

In a standards-based system, grading and reporting must be criterion-referenced. Teachers at all levels must identify what they want their students to learn and be able to do and what
evidence they will use to judge that achievement or performance. Grades based on clearly stated learning criteria have direct meaning and communicate that meaning.

**Differentiating Grading Criteria**

A second challenge is to differentiate the types of grading criteria that teachers will use. Although teachers and students generally consider criterion-referenced grading to be more fair and educative (Kovas, 1993), the specific grading criteria that teachers use may be very diverse. We can classify these criteria into three broad categories: product, process, and progress (Guskey, 1996).

**Standards don’t lessen the responsibility of educators to evaluate the performance of students and to report the results.**

*Product criteria* relate to students’ specific achievements or levels of performance. They describe what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time. Advocates of standards generally favor product criteria. Teachers using product criteria base grades on performance and final products, such as reports, projects, or portfolio assessments of performance, and other culminating demonstrations of learning.

*Process criteria* relate to the final product, but to how students got there. Educators who believe that process criteria do not provide a complete picture of student learning generally favor process criteria. For example, teachers who consider student effort, class behavior, or work habits are using process criteria. So are those who count
daily work, regular class quizzes, homework, class participation, punctuality or assignment in determining students' grades.

Progress criteria relate to how much students actually gain from their learning experiences. Other terms include learning gain, improvement, grading, value-added grading, and educational growth.

Teachers who use progress criteria typically look at how far students have come rather than where students are.

Others attempt to judge students' progress in terms of their 'learning potential.' As a result, progress grading criteria are often highly individualized among students.

Because they are concerned about student motivation, self-esteem, and the social consequences of grading, few teachers today use product criteria solely in determining grades. Instead, most base their grading on some combination of criteria, especially when a student receives only a single grade in a subject area (Brookhart, 1995; Flory, Cross, & Weber, 1993). The majority of teachers also vary the criteria they use from Student to student, relying on account individual circumstances (Tasso & Friedman, 1996). Although teachers do so in an effort to be fair, the result is often a hodgepodge grade that includes elements of achievement, effort, and improvement (Brookhart, 1991). Interpreting the grade or report thus becomes difficult for parents, social workers, community members, and even the students (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995). An A, for example, may mean that the students knew what the teacher expected before instruction began (product), didn't learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress).

Measurement experts generally recommend using product criteria exclusively in determining students' grades. They point out that the more process and progress criteria come into play, the more subjective and biased grades are likely to be (O'Connor, 1999; Ornstein, 1994). How can a teacher know, for example, how difficult a task was for students or how hard they worked to complete it?

Many teachers, however, point out that if they use product criteria exclusively, some high-ability students receive high grades with little effort, whereas the hard work of less-able students is seldom acknowledged. Others say that if teachers consider only product criteria, low-ability students and those who are disadvantaged—students who must work the hardest—have the least incentive to do so. These students find the relationship between high effort and low grades unacceptable and, as a result, often express their displeasure with indifference, deception, or disruption (Tomlinson, 1992).

A practical solution to this problem, and one that increasing numbers of teachers and schools are using, is to establish clear indicators of product, process, and progress, and then to report each separately (Suggs, 2001; Wiggins, 1990). Teachers separate grades or marks for learning skills, effort, work habits, or progress from grades for achievements and performance. Parents generally prefer this approach because it gives them more detailed and descriptive information. It also simplifies reporting for teachers because they no longer have to combine so many diverse types of information into a single grade. The key to success, however, rests in the clear specification of those indicators and the criteria to which they relate. This means that teachers must describe how they plan to evaluate students' achievement, effort, work habits, and progress, and then must communicate these plans directly to students, parents, and others.

Reporting Tools

A third challenge for standards-based education is clarifying the purpose of each reporting tool. Although report cards are the primary method, most schools today use a variety of reporting devices: weekly or monthly progress reports, openhouse meetings, newsletters, evaluated projects or assignments, school Web pages, parent-teacher conferences, and student-led conferences (Guiseley & Bailey, 2001). Each reporting tool must fulfill a specific purpose, which requires considering three vital aspects of communication.
What information do we want to communicate?
• Who is the primary audience for that information?
• How would we like that information to be used?

Many educators make the mistake of choosing their reporting tools first, without giving careful attention to the purpose. For example, some charge headlong into developing a standards-based report card without first addressing core questions about why they are doing it. Their efforts often encounter unexpected resistance and rarely bring positive results. Both parents and teachers perceive the change as a newfangled fad that presents no real advantage over traditional reporting methods. As a result, the majority of these efforts become short-lived experiments and are abandoned after a few troubled years of implementation.

Efforts that begin by clarifying the purpose, however, make intentions clear from the start. If, for instance, the purpose of the report card is to communicate to parents the achievement status of students, then parents must understand the information on the report card and know how to use it. This means that educators should include parents on report card committees and give their input careful consideration. This not only helps mobilize everyone in the reporting process, it also keeps efforts on track. The famous adage that “form follows function.” Once the purpose or function is clear, teachers can address more easily questions regarding form or method (Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

Developing a Reporting Form

The fourth challenge for standards-based education is developing the centerpiece of a standards-based reporting system: the report card. This typically involves a four-step process. First, teams of educators identify the major learning goals or standards that students are expected to achieve at each grade level or course of study. Second, educators establish performance indicators for those learning goals or standards. In other words, educators decide what evidence best illustrates students’ attainment of each goal or standard. Third, they determine graduated levels of quality for assessing student performance. This step involves identifying incremental levels of attainment, sometimes referred to as benchmarks, as students progress toward the learning goals or standards (Andrade, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Finally, educators, often in collaboration with parents, develop a reporting form that communicates teachers’ judgments of students’ progress and achievement in relation to the learning goals or standards.

Many parents initially respond to a standards-based reporting form with: “This is great. But tell me, how is my child doing really?”

Identifying Reporting Standards

Identifying the specific learning goals or standards on which to base grades is probably the most important, but also the most challenging, aspect of standards-based grading. These learning goals or standards should stipulate precisely what students should know and be able to do as a result of their learning experiences. In earlier times, we might have referenced to cognitive skills, learning competencies, or performance outcomes (Guskey, 1999). Teachers frequently list these learning goals in their lesson plans, make note of them on assignments and performance tasks, and include them in monthly or weekly progress reports that go home to parents.

A crucial consideration in identifying learning goals or standards is determining the degree of specificity. Standards that are too specific make reporting forms cumbersome to use and difficult to understand. Standards that are too broad or general, however, make it hard to identify students’ unique strengths and weaknesses. Most state-level standards, for example, tend to be broad and need to be broken down or “unpackaged” into homogeneous categories or topics (Marzano, 1999). For grading and reporting purposes, educators must seek a balance. The standards must be broad enough to allow for efficient communication of student learning, yet specific enough to be useful (see Grunlund, 2000; Marzano & Kendall, 1995; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Another issue is the differentiation of standards across marking periods or grade levels. Most schools using standards-based grading develop reporting forms that are based on grade-level learning goals or standards. Each standard has one level of complexity set for each grade that students are expected to meet before the end of the academic year. Most parents, however, are accustomed to grading systems in which learning standards become increasingly complex with each marking period. If the standard states “Students will write clearly and effectively,” for example, many parents believe that their children should do this each marking period, not simply move toward doing so by the end of the academic year. This is especially true of parents who encourage their children to attain the ‘highest mark possible in all subject areas every marking period.

To educators using such forms, students who receive 1 or 2 on a 4-point grading scale during the first or second marking period are making appropriate progress and are on track for their grade level. For parents,
Facilitating Interpretation

Many parents initially respond to a standards-based reporting system with, "This is great. But tell me, how is my child doing compared to the other children in the class?" They ask these questions because they don't know how to interpret the information. Further, most parents had comparative, norm-based reporting systems when they were in school and are more familiar with reports that compare students to their classmates. Above all, parents want to make sense of the reporting form. Their fear is that their children will reach the end of the school year and won't have made sufficient progress to be promoted to the next grade.

### Example of a Double-Mark, Standards-Based Reporting Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary Progress Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands and uses different skills and strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands the meaning of what is read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads different materials for a variety of purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writes clearly and effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands and uses the steps in the writing process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writes in a variety of forms for different audiences and purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzes and evaluates the effectiveness of written work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands and uses the conventions of writing: punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and legibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens and observes skills to gain understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates ideas clearly and effectively (oral communication).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses communication strategies and skills to work effectively with others (informal communication).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Learning Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation Marks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Meets standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Approaches standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = Beginning/Progressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level Expectation Marks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>++ = Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ = On level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 = Below level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Learning Skills &amp; Effort Marks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E = Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S = Satisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U = Unsatisfactory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This report is based on grade-level standards established for each subject area. The ratings indicate your student's progress in relation to the year-end standard.
To ensure more accurate interpretations, several schools use a two-part marking system with their standards-based reporting form (see example). Every marking period, each student receives two marks for each standard. The first mark indicates the student’s level of progress with regard to the standard—a 1, 2, 3, or 4, indicating beginning, progressing, proficient, or exceptional. The second mark indicates the relation of that level of progress to established expectations at this point in the school year. For example, a *** might indicate advanced for grade-level expectations. A ** might indicate on target or meeting grade-level expectations; and a * would indicate below grade-level expectations or needs improvement.

The advantage of this two-part marking system is that it helps parents make sense of the reporting form each marking period. It also helps alleviate their concerns about what seem like low grades and lets them know whether their children are progressing at an appropriate rate. Further, it helps parents take a standards-based perspective as viewing their children’s performances. Their question is no longer “Where is my child in comparison to his or her classmates?” but “Where is my child in relation to the grade-level learning goals and expectations?”

The one drawback of the two-part marking system is that expectations must take into account individual differences in students’ development of cognitive skills. Because students in any classroom differ in age and cognitive development, some might not meet the specified criteria during a particular marking period—even though they will likely do so before the end of the year. This is especially common in kindergartens and the early primary grades. When students tend to vary widely in these easy-level skills but can make rapid learning progress (Blumert, Lemhöf, Lynch, & Nadeau, 1996). Educators must take these developmental differences into consideration and must explain them to parents.

Choosing Performance-Level Descriptors

Standards-based reporting forms that use numerical grading scales also require a key or legend that explains the meaning of each numeral. These descriptors help parents and others understand what each numeral means.

A common set of descriptors matches performance levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 with the achievement labels beginning, progressing, proficient, and exceptional. If the standards reflect behavioral aspects of student performance, then teachers most commonly use such descriptors as follows, sometimes, usually, and consistently/independently. These labels are preferable to above average, average, and below average, which reflect norm-referenced comparisons rather than criterion-referenced standards.

Such achievement descriptors as exceptional or advanced are also preferable to exceeds standard or extending to designate the highest level of performance. Educators can usually articulate specific performance criteria for an exceptional or advanced level of achievement or performance. Exceeds standard or extending, however, are much less precise and may leave students and parents wondering just what they need to do to exceed or extend. Descriptors should be clear, concise, and directly interpretable.

Many reporting forms include a fifth level of not applicable or not evaluated to designate standards that have not yet been addressed or were not assessed during that particular marking period. Including these labels is preferable to leaving the marking spaces blank because parents often interpret a blank space as an item that the teacher missed or neglected.

Maintaining Consistency

A final challenge is consistency. To communicate with parents, most schools and school districts involve in
At the same time, standards-based grading becomes cumbersome. For most parents, it takes a lot of work. Not only must educators identify the learning goals or standards on which grades will be based, but they also must decide what evidence best illustrates students' attainment of each goal or standard. Identify graduated levels of quality—assessing students' performance, and develop reporting tools that communicate teachers' judgments of learning progress. These tasks may add considerable to the workload of teachers and school leaders.

A second shortcoming is that the reporting forms are sometimes too complicated for parents to understand. In their efforts to provide parents with rich information, educators can go overboard and describe learning goals in unnecessary depth. As a result, reporting forms become cumbersome and time-consuming for teachers to complete and difficult for parents to understand. We must seek a balance in identifying standards that are specific enough to provide parents with useful, prescriptive information, but broad enough to allow for efficient communication between teachers and parents.
couples of study. Because of these curricular differences, standards-based reporting forms at the middle and secondary levels must vary from student to student. The marks need to relate to each student’s achievement and performance in his or her particular courses or academic program. Although advances in technology, such as computerized reporting forms, allow educators to provide such individualized reports, relatively few middle and high school educators have taken up the challenge.

The standards must be broad enough to allow for efficient communication of student learning, yet specific enough to be useful.

New Standards for Grading

As educators clarify student learning goals and standards, the advantages of standards-based grading become increasingly evident. Although it makes reporting forms more detailed and complex, most parents value the richness of the information when the reports are expressed in terms that they can understand and use. Reporting forms that use a two-part marking system show particular promise—but such a system may require additional explanation to parents. Teachers must also set expectations for learning progress not just at the grade level, but also for each marking period.

Successfully implementing standards-based grading and reporting demands a close working relationship among teachers, parents, and school and district leaders. To accurately interpret the reporting form, parents need to know precisely what the standards mean and how to make sense of the various levels of achievement or performance in relation to those standards. Educators must ensure, therefore, that parents are familiar with the language and terminology. Only when all groups understand what grades mean and how they are used to improve student learning will we realize the true value of a standards-based approach to education.

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Grading Policies that Work Against Standards...and How To Fix Them

Thomas R. Guskey

An important element of a successful standards-based reform initiative includes grading and reporting practices that are specific to curriculum and assessment standards. In this article, four grading policies that impose barriers to reform are described. Specific strategies to correct these policies are offered.

The most welcome aspect of the current reform effort that focuses on standards is the belief that students should learn standards to standards. By providing consensus about what is important for students to learn and what skills they should acquire, standards give direction to modern reform initiatives. In particular, they bring much needed focus to curriculum development work and provide the impetus for fashioning new forms of student assessment.

If the true benefits of standards are to be realized, however, educational leaders must view their reform initiatives systemically. This means that in addition to essential curriculum and assessment issues, leaders also must consider organizational factors that exert potentially strong influence on implementation. Policies and organizational procedures at the district, school, and classroom levels can profoundly impact reform initiatives and significantly affect results. Research indicates (see Liberman 1995) that the most carefully articulated curriculum and best-aligned assessments will make little difference if school policies stand in the way of implementation.

Described in this article are four school policies that impose procedural barriers to the implementation of standards-based reform. Also described are specific strategies for correcting them. Each of these policies relates to grading and reporting practices; that is, how students' learning progress is summarized and communicated to parents, students, and others. Despite their importance, grading and reporting are seldom included in discussions of curriculum or assessment reform. Nevertheless, their powerful influence can prevent even modest success in any standards-based reform initiative.

Policy 1: Grading "On the Curve"

In a standards-based system, grading and reporting must be done in reference to specific learning criteria, rather than in reference to normative criteria or "on the curve." In other words, students must be graded in terms of what they have learned and are able to do, not in terms of their relative standing among classmates. The principal advantage of using the normal distribution curve as a basis for assigning grades is that it ensures consistent grade distributions from one teacher to the next. Consequently, every teacher's classes have the same percentage of As, Bs, Cs, etc. But the consequences of this practice are overwhelmingly negative. Research indicates that it is detrimental to the relationships among students and to the relationships between teachers and students (Kohn 1995 and Vol. 996).

Grading on the curve makes learning a highly competitive activity in which students compete against one another for the few scarce rewards (high grades) distributed by the teacher. Under these conditions, students readily see that helping others become successful threatens their own chances for success (Gray 1995, R. T. Johnson, Johnson, and Tauer 1979, D. W. Johnson, Skon, and Johnson 1980). High grades are attained not through excellence in performance, but simply by doing better than one's classmates. As a result, learning becomes a game of winners and losers, and because the number of rewards is kept arbitrarily small, most students are forced to be losers (Haladyna 1999, D. W. Johnson and Johnson 1989).

Most students, as well as most adults, can relate horror stories based on their experiences in classes where they were graded on the curve. Many recall the anger they felt toward the high scoring student in their class who "inflated the curve" and, in their minds, caused other class members to receive a lower grade. Some remember being the object of their classmates' anger because they were that high scoring student. Stories also abound of students hiding books in the library so that their classmates could not use them or removing equipment needed in projects or experiments in order to enhance their chances for a high grade. Furthermore, grading on the curve denies students the opportunity to work together and to help each other attain valuable, shared learning goals.

Perhaps most important, grading on the curve communicates nothing about what students have learned or are able to do. Rather, it tells only a student's relative standing among classmates, based on what are often ill-defined measures of performance.
Policy 2. Selecting Validating Teachers

Students who receive the high grades might actually have performed poorly in terms of the established learning standards, but simply saw that they were not asked to read much and were able to do less work than their classmates. Differences between the schools and the standards, the criteria for marking, and the standards themselves are all areas that need to be examined. In all cases, teachers and the schools that select them must verify this learning in a way other than just a grade. To help in the selection of the correct teachers, we suggest a grading system for each grade that allows for the identification of students who have learned the material presented in the course. Each grade would be based on a number of different criteria.

There are six steps to selecting a grading system:
1. **Revising the Standards:** Teachers must be clear about what they believe students should be able to do before entering each grade. The standards should be clear, measurable, and achievable.
2. **Defining the Criteria:** The criteria for each grade should be defined in advance. These criteria should reflect the standards and be based on the objectives of the course.
3. **Revising the Grading System:** The grading system should be revised to reflect the new criteria. The system should be designed to provide feedback to students on their progress.
4. **Implementing the System:** Teachers must implement the grading system and provide feedback to students on their progress.
5. **Assessing and Adjusting:** The system should be assessed and adjusted periodically to ensure that it is effective.
6. **Using the System:** Teachers should use the system to assess student performance and to provide feedback to students on their progress.

In summary, the selection of a grading system is a critical step in the process of selecting teachers. It is important that the system be clear, measurable, and achievable. It is also important that the system be designed to provide feedback to students on their progress.

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The grades are the basis for selecting teachers. A teacher who is able to achieve high grades with a high percentage of students will be selected for the next grade. However, a teacher who is able to achieve high grades with a low percentage of students will not be selected for the next grade. This system is important because it allows for the identification of students who have learned the material presented in the course.

An increasing number of high schools have resolved this problem simply by revising their grading criteria. They have set up a system in which students are able to achieve high grades in most courses. However, some students are still not able to achieve high grades in all courses. This is because the criteria for grading in some courses are different from the criteria for grading in other courses.

In any educational setting, the criteria for selecting teachers must be clear. Students who receive high grades should not be selected for the next grade simply because they have received high grades. Students who receive high grades in all courses should be selected for the next grade. This system is important because it allows for the identification of students who have learned the material presented in the course.

Formula

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rather than attempting to punish students with a low grade or mark in lieu of further assistance. Some students simply refuse to accept reprimands, and instead, seek more serious consequences. It is important to recognize that these students, while severe, may be a smaller group, and that most students respond positively to support and encouragement.

Policy 3: Using Grades as a Form of Punishment

Implementing grading policies such as this can have important implications for students. Students, who receive an "F", are often required to complete additional coursework in order to pass and improve their grades. This can be a daunting task for many students, especially those who are already struggling with their course work. However, by implementing grading policies that are more lenient, students may be more likely to succeed in their courses and achieve their academic goals.

References:

Policy: Understanding Grading

In the current educational landscape, it is crucial to understand the implications of grading policies and their impact on student performance and motivation. The concept of "zeros" in grading has been a topic of debate, with some advocating for their inclusion to encourage better performance, while others argue against them to maintain a more lenient approach.

The implementation of a zero policy can have a significant effect on student behavior. On one hand, it can act as a deterrent, motivating students to work harder to avoid receiving zeros. On the other hand, it can also create a highly stressful environment, potentially leading to burnout and decreased motivation.

Another concern is the potential for grades to be skewed. Zeros can inflate the overall grade if they are not managed carefully. In contrast, grading on a curve can help maintain consistency and fairness, but it may not fully reflect individual student efforts.

In summary, the decision to include zeros in grading should be based on careful consideration of the pedagogical goals and the specific context of the educational setting. Clear communication with students about the grading policy and its implications is essential to maintain transparency and trust in the educational process.
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Making High School Grades Meaningful

Most teachers base students’ grades on more than one factor. The difficulty is figuring out how to weight and combine the different pieces that go into the final mark. Mr. Guskey suggests a system that not only avoids those problems but gives a better overall picture of a student’s performance than the traditional single letter grade.

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

MICHAEL AND Sheila attend the same high school and take many of the same classes. Michael is an exceptionally bright but obstinate student. He consistently gets high grades on classroom quizzes and tests, even though he rarely completes homework assignments and is often tardy. His compositions and reports show keen insight and present thoughtful analyses of critical issues but are usually turned in two or three days late. Because of his missing homework assignments and lack of punctuality, Michael receives C’s in most of his classes, and his grade-point average lands him in the middle of his high school class rankings. But Michael scores at the highest level on the state...
accountability assessment and qualifies for an honors diploma.

Sheila, on the other hand, is an extremely dedicated and hard-working student. She completes every homework assignment, takes advantage of extra-credit options in all of her classes, and regularly attends special study sessions held by her teachers. Yet, despite her efforts, Sheila often performs poorly on classroom quizzes and tests. Her compositions and reports are well-organized and turned in on time but rarely demonstrate more than a superficial understanding of critical issues. Sheila also receives Cs in most of her classes and has a class ranking very similar to Michael’s. But because she scores at a low level on the state accountability assessment, Sheila is at risk of receiving an alternative diploma.

A rare situation, you say? Unlikely or even impossible? Ask any high school teacher today and most will tell you that they know students very much like Michael and Sheila. Many will admit that they currently have similar students in their classes. While Michael and Sheila may not be typical high school students, they also are not unusual.

How is it possible for students with such different levels of demonstrated knowledge and skill to receive essentially the same grades in their high school classes? How can they have roughly the same grade-point average and class ranking? What does this tell us about the meaning of high school grades and the students who receive those grades? And, most important, what does this tell us about the grading policies and practices of many high school teachers?

Hodgepodge Grading

Many educators contend that the problem lies in the accountability assessments. They believe that the discrepancy between high school course grades and scores on state accountability assessments demonstrates the inadequacy and invalidity of the assessment results. Indeed, these narrow once-a-year assessments may not reveal the true scope or depth of students’ knowledge and skills. On the other hand, policy makers argue that teachers are the source of the problem. They think the mismatch between grades and scores on accountability assessments stems from bias and subjectivity in teachers’ grading practices. There is ample evidence that most teachers receive little training in effective grading and that unintentional bias often influences teachers’ grade assignments. However, a more likely explanation lies in the nature of grading itself and in the challenges teachers face in assigning grades that offer a fair and accurate picture of students’ achievement and performance.

High school teachers today draw from many different sources of evidence in determining students’ grades, and studies show that teachers differ in the procedures they use to combine or summarize that evidence. Some of the major sources of evidence teachers use include:

- Major exams or compositions
- Class quizzes
- Reports or projects
- Student portfolios
- Exhibits of student work
- Laboratory projects
- Student notebooks or journals
- Classroom observations
- Oral presentations
- Homework completion
- Homework quality
- Class participation
- Work habits and neatness
- Effort
- Attendance
- Punctuality of assignment submissions
- Class behavior or attitude
- Progress made

When asked which of these sources of evidence they consider in determining students’ grades, some portion of teachers will report using each one of the elements on the list. When asked how many of these sources of evidence they include, however, responses vary widely. Some teachers base grades on as few as two or three elements, while others incorporate evidence from as many as 15 or 16 — and that is true even among teachers who teach in the same school.

Two factors seem to account for this variation. First is a lack of clarity about the purpose of grading. Discussions about what evidence to use in determining students’ grades are extremely difficult to make when the purpose of grading is unclear. Different sources of evidence vary in their appropriateness and validity depending on the identified purpose.

A second reason for the variation is the format used to report grades. Most high school reporting forms allow only a single grade to be assigned to students for each course or subject area. This compels teachers to distill all of these diverse sources of evidence into a single symbol. The result is a “hodgepodge grade” that includes elements of achievement, attitude, effort, and behavior. Even when teachers clarify the weighting strategies they use to combine these elements and employ computerized grading programs to ensure accuracy in their computations, the final grade remains a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret and
nately presents a true picture of a student's proficiency. To make high school grades more meaningful, we need to address both of these factors. First, we must clarify our purpose in grading. Second, we must decide what evidence best serves that purpose and how best to communicate a summary of that evidence to parents and others.

**CLARIFYING PURPOSES AND CRITERIA**

When asked to identify the purpose of grading, most high school teachers indicate that grades should describe how well students have achieved the learning goals established for a course. In other words, grades should reflect students' performance based on specific learning criteria. Teachers and students alike prefer this approach because they consider it both fair and equitable. But, as described earlier, teachers use widely varying criteria to determine students' grades. In most cases, these can be grouped into three broad categories: product, process, and progress criteria.

*Product criteria* are favored by advocates of standards-based or performance-based approaches to teaching and learning. These educators believe the primary purpose of grading is to communicate a summative evaluation of student achievement and performance. In other words, they seek to assess what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time. Teachers who use product criteria typically base grades exclusively on final examination scores, final reports or projects, overall assessments, and other culminating demonstrations of learning.

*Process criteria* are emphasized by educators who believe product criteria do not provide a complete picture of student learning. From their perspective, grades should reflect not only the final results but also how students got there. Teachers who consider effort or work habits when assigning grades are using process criteria, as are teachers who factor regular classroom quizzes, homework, punctuality of assignments, class participation, or attendance into grade calculations.

*Progress criteria* are used by educators who believe that the most important aspect of grading is how much students have gained from their learning experiences. Other names for progress criteria include "learning gain," "improvement scoring," "value-added learning," and "educational growth." Some educators draw distinctions between progress, which they measure backward from a final performance standard or goal, and growth, which is measured forward from the place a student begins on a learning continuum. However, when achievement is judged using well-defined learning standards that include graduated levels of performance, progress and growth criteria can be considered synonymous.

Teachers who use progress criteria typically look at how much improvement students have made over a specified period of time, rather than just where they are at any one point. As a result, the scoring criteria used in determining student grades may be highly individualized. Most of the current research evidence on the use of progress criteria in grading comes from studies of individualized instruction and special education programs.

Because of concerns about student motivation, self-esteem, and the social consequences of grades, few teachers use only product criteria in determining grades. Instead, most routinely base their grading procedures on some combination of all three types of evidence. Many also vary their grading criteria from student to student, taking into account individual circumstances. Although teachers defend this practice on the basis of fairness, it seriously blurs the meaning of any grade. Interpreting grades thus becomes exceptionally challenging, not only for parents but also for administrators, community members, and even the students themselves.

A grade of A, for example, may mean that the student knew what was intended before instruction began (produce), did not learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress).

**CONFLICTING SOLUTIONS**

Recognizing these interpretation problems, most researchers and measurement specialists recommend the exclusive use of product criteria in determining students' grades. They point out that the more process and progress criteria come into play, the more subjective and biased grades become. How can a teacher know, for example, how difficult a task was for students or how hard they worked to complete it?

Many teachers point out, however, that if they use only product criteria in determining grades, some high-ability students will receive high grades with little effort, while the hard work of less-talented students will go unacknowledged. Consider, for example, two students enrolled in the same physical education class. The first is a well-coordinated athlete who can easily perform any task the teacher asks and so typically does not put forth serious effort. The second student is strug-
A MEANINGFUL ALTERNATIVE

An increasing number of teachers and schools have adopted a practical solution to the problems associated with incorporating these different learning criteria into student grades: they report separate grades or marks on each set of criteria. In other words, after establishing explicit indicators of product, process, and progress criteria, teachers assign a separate grade to each. In this way grades or marks for learning skills, effort, work habits, and learning progress are kept distinct from assessments of achievement and performance. The intent is to provide a better, more accurate, and much more comprehensive picture of what students accomplish in school.

While high school teachers in the United States are just beginning to catch on to the idea of separate grades for product, process, and progress criteria, many Canadian educators have used the practice for years. Each marking period teachers assign students an "achievement" grade based on the students' performance on projects, assessments, and other demonstrations of learning. Often expressed as a letter grade or percentage (A = advanced, B = proficient, C = basic, D = needs improvement, F = unsatisfactory), this "achievement" grade represents the teacher's judgment of the student's level of performance or accomplishment relative to explicit learning goals established for the course. Computations of grade-point averages and class ranks are based solely on these "achievement" or product grades.

In addition, teachers also assign separate grades or marks for homework, class participation, punctuality of assignment submissions, effort, learning progress, and the like. Because these factors usually relate to specific student behaviors, most teachers record numerical marks for each (4 = consistently, 3 = usually, 2 = sometimes, and 1 = rarely). To clarify a mark's meaning, teachers identify specific behavioral indicators for these factors and for the levels of performance in each. For example, the indicators for a "homework" mark might include:

4 = All homework assignments completed and turned in on time.
3 = Only one or two missing or incomplete homework assignments.
2 = Three to five missing or incomplete homework assignments.
1 = Numerous missing or incomplete homework assignments.

Teachers sometimes question the need for this level of specificity. Upon reflection, however, most discover that by including homework assignments as part of an overall grade for students, they already face this challenge. When determining an overall grade, teachers must decide how much credit to give students for completing homework assignments or how much to take away for assignments that were turned in late or not at all. Similarly, when reporting a separate grade for homework, teachers must ensure that students understand the various performance levels so that they know what the mark signifies and what must be done to improve.

Often teachers presume that reporting multiple grades will increase their grading workload. But those who use the procedure claim that it actually makes grading easier and less work. Teachers gather the same evidence on student learning that they did when calculating an over-
all grade but no longer worry about how to weight or combine that evidence. As a result, they avoid irresolvable arguments about appropriateness or fairness of various weighting strategies.

Reporting separate grades for product, process, and progress criteria also makes grading more meaningful. If a parent questions the teacher about a product grade, for example, the teacher simply points to the various process indicators and suggests, "Perhaps if your child completed homework assignments and participated more in class, the 'achievement' grade would be higher." Parents favor the practice because it provides a more comprehensive profile of their child's performance in school. Employers and college admission officers also like systems of separate grades because they offer more detailed information on students' accomplishments. With all grades reported on the transcript, a college admissions office can distinguish between the student who earned high achievement grades with relatively little effort and the one who earned equally high grades through diligence and hard work. The transcript thus becomes a more robust document, presenting a better and more discriminating portrait of students' high school experiences.

Schools would still have the information needed to compute grade-point averages and class rankings, if such computations are still deemed important. Now, however, those averages and rankings would be untainted by undefined aspects of process and progress. As such, they would represent a more valid and appropriate measure of achievement and performance. Furthermore, to the extent that classroom assessments and state accountability assessments are based on the same standards for learning, the relationship between product grades and accountability assessment results would likely be much higher.

The key to success in reporting multiple grades, however, rests on the clear specification of indicators stated to product, process, and progress criteria. Teachers must be able to describe exactly how they plan to evaluate students' achievement, attitude, effort, behavior, and progress. Then they must clearly communicate these criteria to students, parents, and others.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between high school grades and students' performance on state accountability assessments will never be perfect. Grades are derived from courses that can vary significantly across schools and classrooms. In contrast, state accountability assessments typically are designed to measure proficiency based on a set of common standards for student learning. As such, the developers of these types of assessments purposefully avoid content that may be unique to particular learners or learning situations. Furthermore, course grades normally reflect a much broader range of knowledge and skills than can be measured by limited accountability assessments with restricted modes of student response. Nevertheless, concerns about honesty and fairness compel us to reduce the mismatch between these two important measures of student knowledge and skill.

Developing meaningful, reasonable, and equitable grading policies and practices will continue to challenge high school educators. The challenge remains all the more daunting, however, if we continue to use reporting forms that require teachers to combine so many diverse sources of evidence into a single grade. Distinguishing specific "product" criteria on which to base an "achievement" grade allows teachers to offer a better and more precise description of students' academic achievement and performance. To the extent that "process" criteria related to homework, class participation, attitude, effort, responsibility, behavior, and other non-academic factors remain important, they too can be reported. But they should be reported separately. Adopting this approach will clarify the meaning of grades and greatly enhance their communicative value.

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Are Zeros Your Ultimate Weapon?

By Thomas R. Guskey From Principal Leadership

GRADING is one of a teacher’s greatest challenges and most important professional responsibilities. However, few teachers have any formal training in grading methods, and most teachers have limited knowledge about the effectiveness of various grading practices.

As a consequence, when teachers develop their grading policies, they typically reflect back on what they experienced as students and use strategies that they perceived to be fair, reasonable, and equitable. In other words, most teachers do what was done to them.

When teachers are asked why they grade or what purpose grading serves, their responses generally fall into these broad categories:

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To communicate the achievement status of students to parents and others. Grading and reporting provide parents and guardians with information about students' progress and allow them to be involved in the educational process.

To provide information students can use for self-evaluation. Grading and reporting give students information about the adequacy of their academic performance.

To select, identify, and track students for specific educational paths or programs. High grades are typically required for entry into advanced classes or honors programs; low grades are often the first indicator of learning problems that can result in a student's placement into a special needs program. In addition, grades are used as a criterion for admission to colleges and universities.

To provide incentives for students to learn. Although some may debate the idea, there is extensive evidence that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining the amount of effort that students put forth and how seriously students regard a learning task.

To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs. Grade distributions are often compared to judge the effectiveness of new programs or instructional techniques.

To provide evidence of a student's lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior. Grades and other reporting devices are frequently used to document unsuitable behavior by students, and some teachers threaten students with poor grades to encourage more acceptable behaviors.

**Trying All, Achieving None**

Although all of these may be legitimate, teachers seldom agree on which one is most important. As a result, teachers often attempt to address all of these purposes with a single grading procedure or policy and usually end up achieving none very well.

Nearly all teachers do agree, however, that the least important is the sixth. To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior. But few teachers recognize that many of their grading practices serve precisely this purpose, most obviously when they assign zeros to students' work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late.

Many teachers see zeros as their ultimate grading weapon, using them to punish students for not making adequate effort or failing to show appropriate responsibility. Students get zeros for not meeting set deadlines, misbehaving in class, or refusing to heed the teacher's warnings. Some teachers recognize that assigning zeros punishes students academically for behavioral infractions, but most believe such punishment is justified and deserved.

Teachers also use zeros as instruments of control. In most instances, teachers have little direct influence over students' most valued privileges or most feared punishments, unable to restrict their access to automobiles, computer games, television, or social activities. But they do control grades, which can indirectly influence these things. A low grade often prompts parents to enforce punishments more pervasive and compelling to students than those a teacher can enforce. The threat of a zero—and the resulting low grade—allows teachers to impose their will on students who otherwise might be indifferent to a teacher's demands.

**Inaccurate and Unmotivating**

The problems with assigning zeros, however, are numerous and significant. First, a zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student has learned or is able to do. Obviously, if the grade is to represent how well students have learned, mastered established learning standards, or achieved specified learning goals, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark.

Second, the effect of assigning zeros is greatly magnified if combined with the common practice of averaging scores to attain students' overall course grades. Students readily see that receiving a single zero leaves them little chance for success or a high grade because such an extreme score drastically skews the average.

That is why, in scoring such Olympic events as gymnastics or diving, the highest and lowest scores from judges are always eliminated. If they were not, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores. A single zero has more influence on an average than any other score in the group.

Third, and perhaps most important, no studies support the use of zeros or low grades as effective punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, zeros and the low grades they yield more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many regard their low mark or grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade but often feel helpless to make improvements.

Frequently, teachers defend assigning zeros by arguing that they cannot give students credit for work that is incomplete or not turned in—and that is certainly true. But, considering these overwhelmingly negative effects, there are far better ways to motivate and encourage students to complete assignments in a timely manner than with zeros.
Several schools have implemented the following alternatives and new policies have been adopted in recent years. The "Performance Pay" program is one example. This program offers financial incentives to teachers based on student performance. Teachers who achieve high student performance levels receive a bonus. However, the effectiveness of this program is still being evaluated.

Another alternative is the "Value-Added" methodology. This approach focuses on student growth rather than absolute achievement. It measures how much a teacher has contributed to student learning over a period of time. This method is designed to be more equitable because it takes into account the background and prior achievement levels of students.

To address these issues, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has proposed a comprehensive set of recommendations. These recommendations include:

1. **Professional Development:** Provide ongoing professional development opportunities to improve teaching skills.
2. **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Implement data-driven decision making processes to inform instructional strategies.
3. **Collaborative Teams:** Encourage collaboration among teachers to share best practices and resources.
4. **School-Wide Improvement Plans:** Develop school-wide improvement plans to address specific needs.
5. **Parent Engagement:** Increase parent engagement in the educational process to support student learning.

These recommendations aim to create a more equitable and effective educational system that supports all students. By implementing these strategies, schools can work towards fostering a more inclusive and successful learning environment for all students.
The Communication Challenge Of Standards-Based Reporting

As traditional reporting systems based on letter grades are replaced by standards-based reporting systems, parents are often left wondering how their child is doing in school. Mr. Guskey offers some suggestions for overcoming this communication challenge.

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

A CLASSIC comic from the "Hi & Lois" strip shows their son arriving home from school and proudly announcing, "My teacher gave me a 'Super' on my report."

"Wow!" exclaims Lois, "Is that the best you can get?"

"No," he replies, "'Stupendous,' 'Outrageous,' and 'Magnificent' are all better. 'Super' is just okay."

Like all good humor, this comic strip strikes a familiar note with many readers, especially the parents of school-age children. It also highlights one of the greatest challenges educators face today: describing students' level of academic performance in meaningful ways to parents and others.

Moving away from traditional reporting systems based on letter grades and toward standards-based reporting systems means that we must articulate clearly what we expect students to learn and be able to do. That curriculum challenge is generally met through the development of specific content and performance standards. While meeting this challenge has been difficult and the quality of the work wide-ranging, most states and school districts today have curricula that are based on standards. The communication challenge of issuing progress reports and report cards that describe students' performance with regard to those standards, however, remains before us. It's also proving to be a more difficult challenge than most educators ever anticipated.

STANDARDS-BASED REPORT CARDS

Developing a standards-based report card is a multi-step process. First, the major learning goals or standards must be identified, and the specific performance cri-


326 PHI DELTA KAPPAN
teria for demonstrating mastery of those goals or standards have to be set. Next, graduated levels of performance—or benchmarks—for achieving each goal or standard must be established. This effort typically requires determining three or four identifiable steps in students’ progress toward mastery of each standard. In addition, meaningful labels need to be attached to these levels or steps in order to describe students’ progress to their parents, to other interested parties, and to the students themselves. This is where the communication challenge gets particularly tricky.

To discover what terminology educators currently use to convey different levels of progress in student learning, I recently collected the labels from standards-based report cards obtained from a non-random sample of school districts throughout the U.S. and Canada. I also gathered the labels used to denote different levels of student performance in a number of state assessment programs and several well-known standardized assessment programs. Two colleagues and I then grouped these labels into general categories based on our judgments of what aspects of performance they were intended to describe. (See Table 1.) While most of these judgments were easy enough, deciding whether a label pertained to a level of “Understanding/Quality” or a level of “Mastery/Proficiency” proved particularly troublesome and remains open to discussion.

Next we shared these labels with parents of school-age children in structured focus groups. We asked the parents to identify which labels made sense and which ones did not. Their responses were amazingly consistent, highly informative, and, in some cases, quite surprising.

PARENTS’ INTERPRETATIONS

We found that parents generally interpreted the labels according to their personal experiences with grading and reporting. And since parents’ experiences with grades tend to be restricted to letter grades, most parents immediately translated each label into a letter grade. So, for example, “Advanced” means “A,” “Proficient” means “B,” and so on. Regardless of the labels actually used, the meaning parents took away from them was based on what they believed they understood best, and, for most parents, that was letter grades.

By and large parents also interpreted the labels from a norm-referenced perspective. Again, probably as a result of their personal experiences in schools where grades were based on each student’s relative standing among classmates, parents interpreted the labels similarly. So for many parents, “Basic” and “Intermediate” imply “average” or “in the middle of the class.” After explaining to parents that these labels were designed to communicate a student’s learning progress with regard to specific learning goals or standards, rather than to designate a student’s standing among classmates, we asked parents to identify the labels that seemed clearer or more meaningful. Most of the labels received mixed responses, with no particular set being clearly preferred. However, certain labels were singled out by parents as confusing or meaningless.

Parents were especially baffled by the labels, “Pre-Emergent” and “Emerging.” Several remarked jokingly that “Emerging” conveyed images of “a slimy creature coming out of a swamp.” When we indicated that “Emerging” generally implies “Beginning,” they responded, “If you mean ‘Beginning,’ why not just say ‘Beginning’?”

Another label parents found puzzling was “Exceeds Standard.” Labels such as “Advanced,” “Exemplary,” “Exemplary,” “Distinguished,” and “Outstanding” all seemed to have

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**TABLE 1. Indicators of Student Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Levels of Understanding/Quality</th>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Apprentice</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modest</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Accepting Standard</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Exemplary</td>
<td>Unqualified</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Levels of Mastery/Proficiency</th>
<th>Below Standard</th>
<th>Meets Standard</th>
<th>Exceeds Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Below Standard</td>
<td>Meets Standard</td>
<td>Exceeds Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Accepting Standard</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Pre-Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Frequency of Display</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Consistently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Usually</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Degree of Effectiveness</th>
<th>Ineffective</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Moderately Effective</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly Effective</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Sufficient Evidence</td>
<td>Exhaustive Evidence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Evidence of Accomplishment</th>
<th>Little or No Evidence</th>
<th>Partial Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sufficient Evidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
dearer meaning. Parents understood how specific expectations or criteria might be associated with these levels. But to many parents, ‘Exceeds Standard’ was especially vague and unprecise. Several interpreted it as meaning something ‘more than what’s expected,’ but they were unsure just what that might be.

MEETING THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

To improve the usefulness and communicative value of standards-based report cards, we need to ensure that parents and others understand the information they include. We must also acknowledge that, if parents don’t understand the information in the report card, it’s not their fault. As communicators, it is our responsibility to make sure that our message is clear and comprehensible to those for whom it is intended. This is the essence of the communication challenge involved in developing a standards-based report card.

Therefore, in describing different levels of students’ performance with regard to learning goals or standards, we must choose labels that are expressive, precise, and meaningful. The following four guidelines should help in that effort.

1. Avoid comparative language. Because parents so often interpret grades in terms of norm-referenced comparisons, in which a child’s performance is judged relative to that of his or her classmates, adjusting to a standards-based, criterion-referenced system is particularly difficult. The transition is made all the more frustrating when educators use such comparative labels as “Below Average,” “Average,” and “Superior.” The labels we use should always relate to clearly stated performance indicators that communicate where students stand in reference to specific expectations for their learning. This helps parents change their perspective from “How is my child doing compared to other students in the class?” to “How is my child doing with regard to the learning expectations for this level?”

2. Provide examples based on student work. One of the best ways to promote understanding and to facilitate parents’ transition from norm-referenced comparisons to standards-based reporting is to provide clear examples of student work at the various performance levels. Such examples enhance parents’ knowledge of teachers’ expectations. They also allow parents to become more discerning judges of their child’s performance and then to better assist their child in making progress. This requires that school leaders provide time for teachers to engage in conversations about what is meant by “Proficient” and what examples of “Proficient” student work look like.

3. Distinguish between “Levels of Understanding” and “Frequency of Display.” Parents get confused when educators use indicators that confound what students are able to do with how often they do it. The first implies “quality” to parents, while the second appears to signify “quantity” or “rate of occurrence.” While “Frequency of Display” labels such as “Occasionally,” “Frequently,” and “Consistently” work well when describing students’ work habits, study skills, or behavior in school, they often fall short when trying to explain to parents what students have learned and are able to do.

4. Be consistent. One reason so many parents translate labels into letter grades is that it provides a common basis for understanding and interpretation. This is particularly true in schools where one set of labels is used on the elementary report card, another set on the secondary report card, another set for state assessment results, and still another set for standardized assessment reports. No wonder parents who face this mish-mash ask, “Are ‘Adequate’ and ‘Satisfactory’ the same as ‘Proficient’? Are they all equivalent to a ‘B’?” Achieving consistency may prove difficult in schools bound to the use of labels incorporated in their state’s assessment system. Still, by reducing the number of labels with which parents must contend, educators can facilitate parents’ understanding and encourage greater parent involvement in education.

Our knowledge of effective grading and reporting has grown tremendously in recent years, although little of that knowledge seems to be finding its way in-
The Theory of Everything and
Yada, Yada, Yada

HE FIRST thing I do every morning is check for education news. This morning my eyes were drawn immediately to the headline that read, "The Wire Prize for 'Theory of Everything.'" "Wow," I thought as I clicked on the link. "The theory of everything—that's a lot of stuff." I waited with anticipation as my dial-up connection loaded the story. Perhaps I would finally be able to understand some of the things that have puzzled me for a lifetime—like why we have a national holiday to celebrate Columbus' miscalculated route to Asia, or how it is that, generations after generation, millions of people successfully conspire to perpetuate the Santa Claus hoax.

When the page finally loaded, a quick scan of the article left me disappointed. The trio's theory doesn't answer my questions. It explains things like asymptotic freedom, quarks, color spinning on a table, and the way subatomic particles behave with gravity—"all things I admit I've never spent a second wondering about."

Still, I really do admire their theory—or think I would if I understood anything at all about it. Turn the two, David Gross, David Polanner, and Frank Wilczek, won the Nobel Prize for physics with an "outlandish" idea they began to explore more than 50 years ago. As a result of their tenacity, string theorists claim to the scientific community have "built a model of how the universe was born, how it works, and how it will ultimately die." These guys didn't just think inside the box. They invented a whole new box and then thought outside of it. One of the winners said his wife was pouring the champagne at aie. I think there's no sense in agreeing that a Nobel Prize in champagne-wort- Thy. But even more than that, it must be vindicating. It might even be worth going to a high school reunion. I bet the guys who ridiculed their idea as outlandish back in the Seventies are feeling pretty silly now. I have a new theory, too. It isn't as big as theirs—but what could be? I think it would

TOO PRACTICE. One theme that has emerged from this fund of new knowledge is that grading and reporting are less exercises in quantifying achievement than they are challenges in effective communication. Deciding what labels to use in describing students' level of performance with regard to standards is an essential first step in meeting that communication challenge. Labels must be chosen to convey honest, meaningful, and useful information to parents and others in order to facilitate their understanding of educators' expectations for student learning. When parents and others recognize the intent of a standards-based report card and can make sense of the information it includes, they are better able to work with educators as partners in school improvement. Perhaps most important, a standards-based report card that uses clear and understandable labels helps break down the barriers between home and school and provides a basis for effective collaboration in efforts to help every student learn well.
Inflation not the issue; focus on grades’ purpose

By Thomas R. Guskey

Grade inflation deeply concerns many university officials today. Recent debates on grade inflation at the University of Kentucky and Eastern Kentucky University are typical of those raging at universities throughout the nation. Unfortunately, most of these debates focus on the wrong issues. As a result, the solutions proposed are misguided.

The problem with grade inflation is not simply that more students are receiving high grades. It is that we're not sure what those grades mean. Adding pluses and minuses to grades adds nothing to their meaning when the criteria by which grades are assigned remain ambiguous.

The question that needs to be addressed in these debates is, "What is the purpose of grading?" If, as some professors think, the purpose of grading is to discriminate among students, then we must maximize the differences between students in terms of their performance. Because it's difficult to distinguish among students if many do well, we must make the differences in their performance as great as possible. The best mechanism for maximizing these differences is poor teaching. When students are taught poorly, only those who are able to teach themselves learn well and receive high marks. The majority of students who need the help and assistance of their professors receive the low marks.

Maximizing differences among students is typically accompanied by "grading on the curve." Thus, if students are graded according to their relative standing among classmates, grading on the curve makes it easy to adjust for grade differences between departments or classes by simply matching the top 25 percent of students, or the top 20 percent, receive the highest grade. But when students are graded on the curve, a high mark does not represent excellent performance, as some may think. It means only that the performance was somewhat better than that of others in the class, all of whom might have performed minimally.

Grading on the curve also makes learning highly competitive. Students must compete among themselves for the few scarce rewards (high grades) distributed by the professor. Under these conditions, students avoid helping each other because doing so is detrimental to their chances for success. Getting a high grade doesn't mean performing excellently; it means simply doing better than your classmates.

On the other hand, if the purpose of grading is to reflect how well students have learned, then we must follow different procedures. First, we must clarify what we want students to learn and be able to do. Second, we must identify clear criteria or standards by which their learning will be judged. That is, we must decide what evidence best represents what students have learned. Teaching then becomes an organized and purposeful effort designed to help all students meet those standards. The goal is to develop talent, not simply to select talent.

Grades that reflect well-defined learning standards have direct meaning. They describe what students have accomplished and the skills they have acquired. Grades based on learning standards also bring new significance to discussions of differences in grade distributions across departments and classes. Students' grades in some professors' classes may be higher because the standards are less rigorous. A comparison of related learning criteria would address this issue. It also may be, however, that some professors are simply better than others at helping their students meet rigorous and challenging learning standards. Such evidence would be invaluable in efforts to improve instructional quality.

The problem is that defining clear learning standards and deciding what evidence best reflects those standards is hard work. It takes lots of time, clear thinking, and dedicated effort. Professors don't always know what standards are appropriate or what evidence can be used to verify students' attainment of those standards. But it's an exacting, precisely the kind of debate that should be going on in colleges and universities. And isn't this debate more likely to benefit students than one that revolves around how many categories to have in a grading system?

Adding more categories to the grading system provides only the illusion of accuracy in the absence of clearly specified learning criteria. It also offers little to solve the real problems that underlie grade inflation. Until we precisely identify what evidence best identifies what students are expected to learn, articulate the criteria by which their learning will be judged and clearly communicate these criteria to students, grading will remain an arbitrary and highly subjective process that victimizes more students than it helps.

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