WHITE PAPER

Grading Woes: Traditional or Standards-Based?

January 11, 2019



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The term ‘Standards-Based Grading’ (SBG) is one that has recently swept into the educational system, but what does it actually mean? How does it differ from Traditional Grading? This innovation focuses on increasing student achievement and learning through measuring specific levels of mastery. Implementing such practices has been understood to make grading more meaningful, which Muñoz and Guskey (2015) stated to be “the best practice for sound classroom assessment.” Standards-Based Grading is then combined with updated instructional practices to facilitate additional student engagement and enrich the classroom environment. This is all then interpreted and shared between educators, parents and students on progress reports and report cards. A traditional report card provides parents with an average grade for each subject the student is enrolled in; this average is represented using an A, B, C, D, F standard scale which we are all quite familiar with by now. However, Hochbein and Pollio (2016) have reportedly spoken out to “cause questioning regarding what these (Traditional) grades actually mean,” a seemingly mundane process that has been discussed for several decades. Cox (2011) referenced the changeover of veteran teachers to SBG, noting the many positive changes associated with the transition. Traditional Grading reports are being replaced with Standards-Based Grading in schools across the nation, at least those that are open to the change thus far, because it provides improved feedback, student ownership, more relevant instruction and is shown to correlate with higher standardized test scores.

**Traditional Grading versus Standards-Based Grading**

 To better understand how Traditional Grading varies from Standards-Based instruction, let’s take a closer look at each one. Standards-Based Grading provides a specific student learning target. Rather than averaging a student’s scores together to get their traditional average, the learning targets are assessed individually and show how well a student has mastered each one. This allows parents to see that their child has mastered, for example, how to define a number sentence, but is still working on solving number sentences with brackets and braces. This type of feedback provides specific information that allows the parent to work in a more detailed and supportive manner with their child on areas where they directly need help. According to Hochbein and Pollio (2016), “principals have noted unintentional benefits from implementing SBG which includes meaningful conversation about what is being taught and why students are receiving the score they have.“ One principal emphasized that “this is type of authentic conversation that is different from trying to simply justify why a student received a B- instead of a C+ and vice versa,” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016). Furthermore, Hendry, Armstrong, and Bromberger (2012) noted that “If students are clear about what is expected of them, they should be able to target their learning efforts more effectively,” (p. 149). On the other hand, if the child receives a “B” average in math there is no way for the parent to know specifically from that report why the student has a B, instead of an A, etc. Both grading types require students to complete formative and summative assessments in the form of standards-aligned activities that may include projects, quizzes, essays, presentations, and worksheets, but Standards-Based Grading allows for increased differentiation so teachers can provide work to students that pushes them towards appropriate mastery levels of their unique individual learning targets for that course. “Obtaining mastery requires different levels of practice; all too often students are given the same assignments, although their levels of mastery vary,” (Tucker, 2018).

Instead of showing averages, Standards-Based Grading is presented using a 1 – 4 point scale, or what is commonly referred to as a rubric, with 1 representing no prior knowledge; 2 representing partial mastery; 3 representing a target being met; and 4 representing performances that exceed targets. Figure 1 (Common Goal Systems, 2019) shows an example of a Traditional Grading scale versus a Standards-Based Grading scale.



Figure 1 (Common Goal Systems, 2019)

As one can see, the feedback presented for one subject is much more detailed and comprehensive on the Standards-Based Grading scale. “Improved feedback is noted to be one of the many benefits of this grading system,” (Cox, 2011).

**Improved Feedback**

 One of the benefits of the SBG is the feedback provided to students and parents. The use of stronger and more detailed feedback is shown to accelerate learning. Rather than students simply acquiring a class average, they receive targeted feedback about tasks that directly relate to content skills and their performance in mastering each one. Students have a clearer sense of their current levels of desired improvement and the steps they can take to reach the next level of mastery. Throughout this process, students are able to “take more ownership of their own learning,” (Duker, Gawboy, Hughes, 2015).

 The notion of students taking more ownership in their own learning process is applicable to various content areas. Duker, Gawboy, Hughes, and Shaffer (2015) reported the impact of SBG in a music classroom. The teacher noted that the hardest part of having dozens of students per day is keeping track of who has mastered what, and which students need interventions to master specific content. “Standards-Based Grading provides students with summaries of their progress towards different and individual learning objectives,” (Duker, Gawboy, Hughes, & Shaffer, 2015, p. 8) and allows teachers to continue to focus on multiple students with a variety of needs and specific interventions using SBG.

**Student Ownership**

 The learning targets within SBG are written in student-friendly language. This student-friendly language allows the goals of the classroom to be understood. Meanwhile, the learning targets may be further broken down to show students a scaffolded ladder on how they can reach the top and master each group of learning standards. By providing students with a detailed path to success and mastery of learning targets, they are able to take steps to complete self-assessments that give them a clear sense of what they can do move forward. They are able to take the initiative and achieve their goals. For example, a student who is currently able to multiply a single-digit number with a multiple digit number and is at the partial mastery level would know that to reach full mastery, they need to multiply multi-digit numbers using teacher demonstrated strategies. This gives them the choice to empower themselves, giving them confidence and independence within the confines of the classroom. Furthermore, the implementation of these standards allows the teacher to deliver more relevant instruction.

**More Relevant Instruction**

 Rather than a continuous pre-planned curriculum that results in lesson one being taught on day 1, lesson two on day 2, and so on, SBG allows for “more relevant instruction to be presented at varying rates based on students’ needs,” Hochbein and Pollio (2016). Traditional Grading often resulted in little adjustment to instruction that forced students to move ahead with content before they were ready. Meanwhile, SBG provides opportunities for differentiation that allows for students who have reached mastery to proceed with more challenging work rather than becoming bored or distracted, while students who need more practice work are able to to refine unmastered skills. In other words, SBG provides teachers with a clearer illustration of what students understand and do not yet understand, so the lessons are better geared towards instructional grouping with level-appropriate activities. Moreover, Traditional Grading often leads to poorly-fitting instruction that result in students, teachers, and parents being frustrated with course material. SBG creates a more positive experience where a cookie cutter one-size-fits-all classroom design is replaced with differentiated instruction that increases academic progress. As students receive intermediate lessons to facilitate mastery, they reach greater lessons of success which leads to increased motivation. Hochbein and Pollio (2016) reported that “If a student did not demonstrate competency, teachers developed interventions that focused specifically on the student’s identified needs,” (p. 52).

 SBG encourages intrinsic motivation because students are less focused on the question, ‘will this be graded’ or ‘is this extra credit’? Students understand that each assessment is geared towards learning and mastery. It is this striving for mastery that transforms student attitudes and builds a natural love for learning. Students become more focused on learning “for their own enjoyment and to sustain higher levels of mastery,” Hochbein and Pollio (2016).

**How does SBG Impact Test Scores?**

 Public education seeks to prepare students for subsequent grade levels, but it also requires preparation for completing standardized tests. A valid question might be…does implementing SBG impact standardized test scores? Hochbein and Pollio (2016) reported their quantitative data related to how students using SBG scored on standardized tests in comparison to students using Traditional Grading scales. A variety of anecdotal, numerical and observational data was collected to answer their two research questions: “Does a stronger association exist between Standards-Based Grading and standardized test scores than with Traditional Grading practices?”; and “Does a stronger association exist between Standards-Based Grading and minority or disadvantages students’ standardized test scores than with Traditional Grading practices?” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016, p. 50). Eleven high schools in Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky had a lot riding on their transition to SBG with significant sanctions in place to improve standardized testing scores. All teachers began by creating assessments relating to three-key standards for their specific content; Hendry, Armstrong, and Hendry (2012) stated that “implementing Standards-Based assessments includes involving academic staff in developing written descriptions of standards for assessment tasks, often called ‘grade descriptors,” (Hendry, Armstrong, & Bromberg, 2012, p. 150).

While only a somewhat positive and weak correlation was noted between Traditional Grading and standardized test results, students learning with SBG showed a much higher level of proficiency on standardized testing. More specifically, “1,163 students completed an Algebra course and the correlating standardized assessment,” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016). Out of the “466 students earning A’s or B’s on the traditional grading scale, only 26% of those students scored proficient on the standardized test and only eleven students earned the highest score of distinguished,” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016). In comparison, the same students completed an Algebra course, but were graded using a SBG model. From this study, “568 students earned equivalent to A’s or B’s in their levels of mastery with 55% of those students demonstrating proficiency on the standardized assessment and 22 students scored at a distinguished level,” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016). Clearly, a strong correlation was noted between Standards-Based Grading and standardized testing improvements.

**Conclusion**

 Simply put, Standards-Based Grading provides a more accurate, detailed and comprehensive measurement of learning. Students’ successes or challenges are no longer represented by a single class average. Instead of a letter that reflects how well a student did for an entire course term, there is a more accurate record of mastery for specific target standard that is more meaningful in clarifying what students do and do not know at any given time. Replacing Traditional Grading with SBG has shown to offer many benefits including improved feedback, a genuine student interest in course material that is being taught and instruction that is more specifically geared towards students’ individual needs. Furthermore, studies confirm that students receiving grades via the Standards-Based Grading system are performing across the board more in line with their grades, rather than students who are receiving Traditional grades. Guskey, Jung, and Swan (2011) stated that “schools have the ability to revolutionize students’ learning through the use of alternate grading practices, such as the Standards-Based Grading practices.”

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