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Helping Standards Make the GRADE

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

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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-ranked 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 *A*s, *B*s, and *C*s. 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

vidence they will use to judge that chievement or performance. Grades ased on clearly stated learning criteria ave direct meaning and communicate hat meaning.

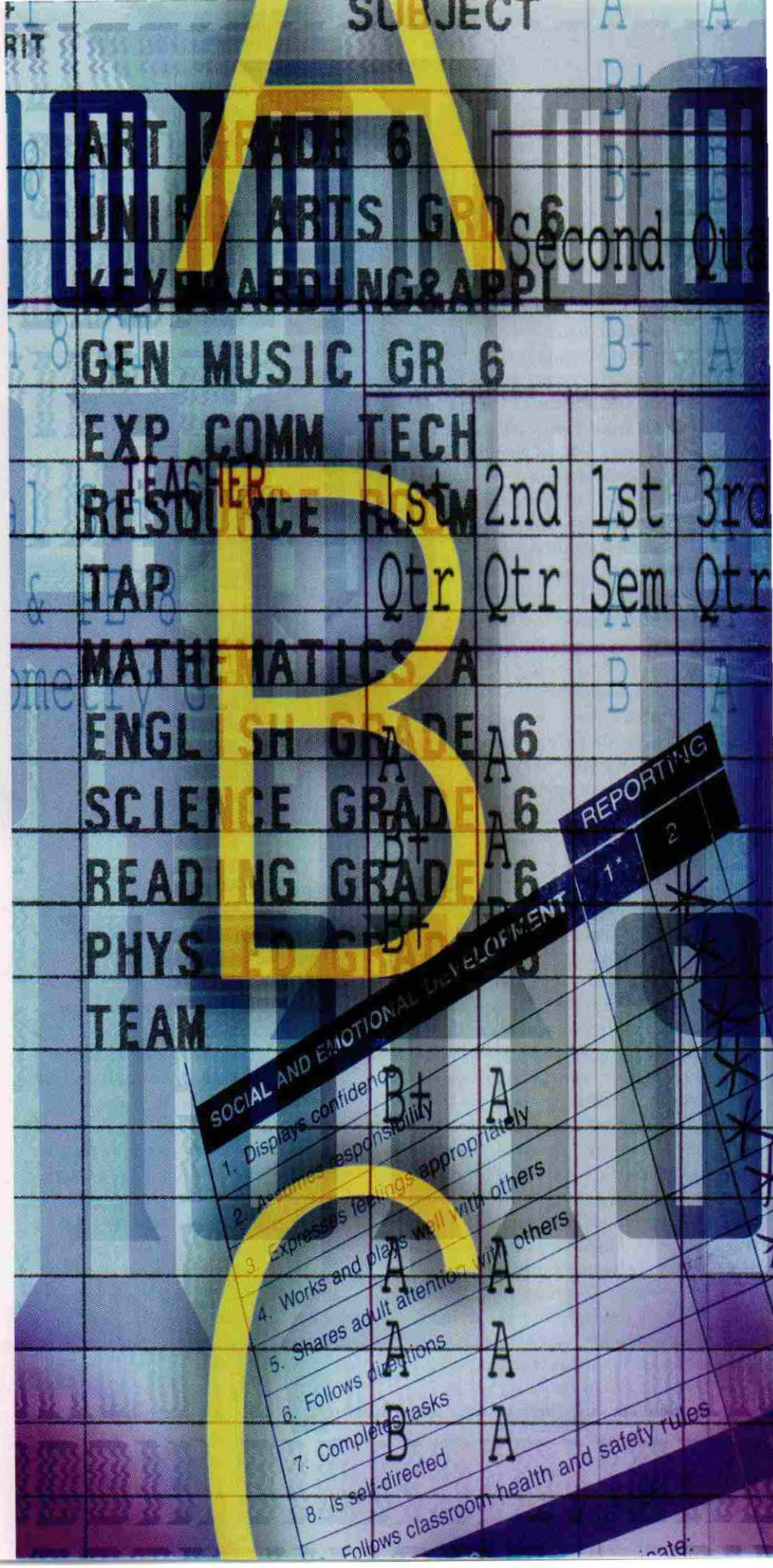
Differentiating Grading Criteria

A second challenge is to differentiate he types of grading criteria that eachers will use. Although teachers and tudents generally consider criterion-eferenced grading to be more fair and quitable (Kovas, 1993), the specific rading criteria that teachers use may be very diverse. We can classify these riteria into three broad categories: *product*, *process*, and *progress* (Guskey, 996).

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

Product criteria relate to students' pecific achievements or levels of erformance. They describe what tudents know and are able to do at a articular point in time. Advocates of tandards generally favor product riteria. Teachers using product criteria ase students' grades or reports exclu-ively on final examination scores; final roducts, such as reports, projects, or ortfolios; overall assessments of perfor-nance; and other culminating demon-trations of learning.

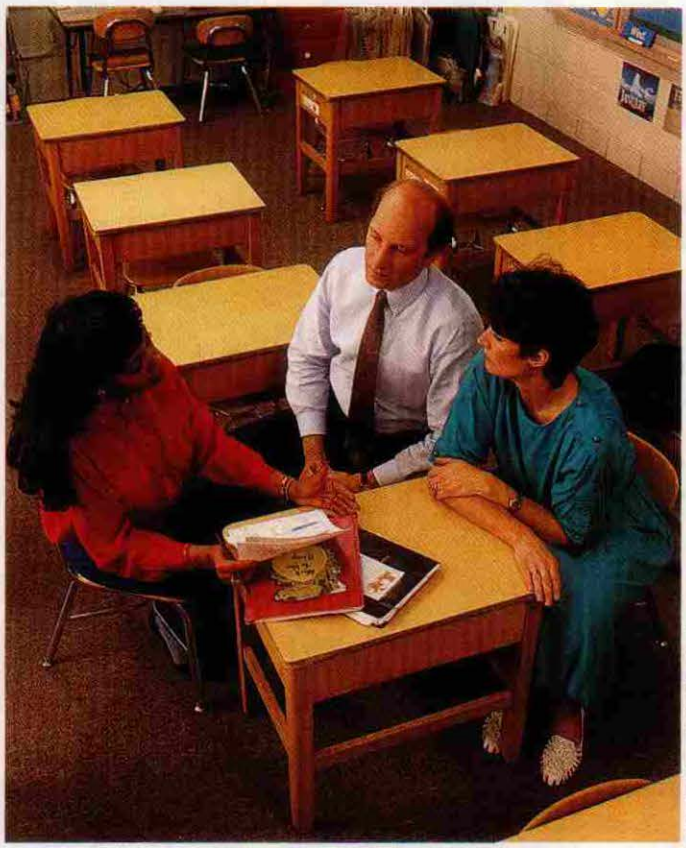
Process criteria relate not to the final esults, but to how students got there. ducators who believe that product riteria do not provide a complete icture of student learning generally avor process criteria. For example, eachers who consider student effort, lass behavior, or work habits are using rocess criteria. So are those who count



daily work, regular classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, punctuality of assignments, or attendance 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, 1993; Frary, Cross, & Weber, 1993). The majority of teachers also vary the criteria they use from student to student, taking into account individual circumstances (Truog & 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, administrators, community members, and even the students (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995). An *A*, for example, may mean that the student 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).



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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-talented 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 (Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins, 1996). Teachers separate grades or marks for learning skills, effort, work habits, or progress from grades for achievement and performance. Parents generally prefer this approach because it gives them more detailed and prescriptive 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, open-house meetings, newsletters, evaluated projects or assignments, school Web pages, parent-teacher conferences, and student-led conferences (Guskey & 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 guides architecture also applies to grading and reporting: *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.

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 referred 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 "unpacked" 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 Gronlund, 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.

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

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,

however, a report card filled with *1*s nd *2*s, when the highest mark is a *4*, auses great concern. They think that heir children are failing. Although ncluding a statement on the reporting orm, such as "Marks indicate progress oward end-of-the-year learning stanards," is helpful, it may not alleviate arents' concerns.

Facilitating Interpretation

Many parents initially respond to a standards-based reporting form with, "This is great. But tell me, how is my child doing *really*?" Or they ask, "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

Elementary Progress Report

Reading	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**
Understands and uses different skills and strategies	1+	2++		
Understands the meaning of what is read	1++	2+		
Reads different materials for a variety of purposes	1-	2-		
Reading level		1++	2+	
Work habits	S	S		
Writing	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**
Writes clearly and effectively	1+	2++		
Understands and uses the steps in the writing process	1++	2++		
Writes in a variety of forms for different audiences and purposes	1+	2-		
Analyzes and evaluates the effectiveness of written work	N	1+		
Understands and uses the conventions of writing: punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and legibility	1-	2-		
Work habits	S	S		
Communication	**1st**	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**
Uses listening and observational skills to gain understanding	1+	2-		
Communicates ideas clearly and effectively (formal communication)	1-	2+		
Uses communication strategies and skills to work effectively with others (informal communication)	N	1+		
Work habits	U	S		

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.

Evaluation Marks

4 = Exceptional
3 = Meets standard
2 = Approaches standard
1 = Beginning standard
N = Not applicable

Level Expectation Marks

++ = Advanced
\+ = On level
– = Below level

Social Learning Skills & Effort Marks

E = Exceptional
S = Satisfactory
U = Unsatisfactory

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*.


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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 in 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 kindergarten and the early primary grades, when students tend to vary widely in their entry-level skills but can make rapid learning progress (Shuster, Lemma, 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 students' performance, then teachers more commonly use such descriptors as *seldom*, *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 involved in

standards-based grading try to maintain a similar reporting format across grade levels. Most also use the same performance-level indicators at all grade levels so that parents don't have to learn a new set of procedures for interpreting the reporting form each year as their children move from one grade level to the next. Many parents also see consistency as an extension of a well-designed curriculum. The standards at each grade level build on and extend those from earlier levels.

While maintaining a similar format across grade levels, however, most schools and school districts list different standards on the reporting form for each level. Although the reporting format and performance indicators remain the same, the standards on the 1st grade reporting form are different from those on the 2nd grade form, and so on. This gives parents a clear picture of the increasing complexity of the standards at each subsequent grade level.

An alternative approach is to develop one form that lists the same broad standards for multiple grades. To clarify the difference at each grade level, a curriculum guidebook describing precisely what the standard means and what criteria are used in evaluating the standard at each grade level usually accompanies the form. Most reporting forms of this type also include a narrative section, in which teachers offer additional explanations. Although this approach to standards-based grading simplifies the reporting form, it also requires significant parent training and a close working relationship among parents, teachers, and school and district leaders (Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

Advantages and Shortcomings

When we establish clear learning goals or standards, standards-based grading offers important information about students' achievement and performance. If sufficiently detailed, the information is useful for both diagnostic and prescriptive purposes. For these reasons, standards-based grading facilitates teaching and learning better than almost any other grading method.

At the same time, standards-based grading has shortcomings. First and foremost, 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 for assessing students' performance, and develop reporting tools that communicate teachers' judgements of learning progress. These tasks may add considerably 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 detail. As a result, reporting forms become cumbersome and time-consuming for teachers to complete and difficult for parents to understand. We must seek a crucial balance in identifying standards that are specific enough to provide parents with useful, prescriptive information, but broad enough to allow for efficient communication between educators and parents.

A third shortcoming is that the report may not communicate the appropriateness of students' progress. Simply reporting a student's level of proficiency with regard to a particular standard communicates nothing about the adequacy of that level of achievement or performance. To make sense of the information, parents need to know how that level of achievement or performance compares to the established learning expectations for that particular grade level.

Finally, although teachers can use standards-based grading at any grade level and in any course of study, most current applications are restricted to the elementary level where there is little curriculum differentiation. In the middle grades and at the secondary level, students usually pursue more diverse

courses 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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