

# Standards-based grading and reporting will improve education



Common Core

**By Marco A. Muñoz and Thomas R. Guskey**

*Making clear linkages between standards, assessment, grading, and reporting that are concisely reported work for the betterment of ALL students.*

Grading and reporting are foundational elements in nearly every educational system. Grading represents teachers' evaluations — formative or summative — of students' performance. Reporting is how the results of those evaluations are communicated to students, parents, or others. Because of their fundamental nature, educators must ensure that grading and reporting always meet the criteria for validity and reliability. And because of their primary communication purpose, educators must also ensure that grading and reporting are meaningful, accurate, and fair.

## **What research tells us**

The first step in sound classroom assessment practices associated with grading is to ensure that grades are meaningful. In determining students' grades, teachers typically merge scores from major exams, compositions, quizzes, projects, and reports, along with evidence from homework, punctuality in turning in assignments, class participation, work habits, and effort. Computerized grading programs help teachers apply different weights to each of these categories (Guskey, 2002) that then are combined in idiosyncratic ways (McMillan, 2001; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). The result often is a grade that is impossible to interpret accurately or meaningfully (Brookhart & Nitko,

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2008; Cross & Frary, 1996). To make grades more meaningful, we need to address both the purpose of grades and the format used to report them.

### **Purpose and criteria**

The purpose of grading is to describe how well students have achieved the learning objectives or goals established for a class or course of study. Grades should reflect students' performance on specific learning criteria. Establishing clearly articulated criteria for grades makes the grading process more fair and equitable. Unfortunately, different teachers often use widely varying criteria in determining students' grades, and students often aren't well-informed about those criteria.

given moment. Scoring criteria may be highly individualized among students. For example, grades might be based on the number of skills or standards in a learning continuum that students mastered and on the adequacy of that level of progress for each student. Most of the research evidence on progress criteria comes from studies of individualized instruction (Esty & Teppo, 1992) and special education programs (Gersten, Vaughn, & Brengelman, 1996; Jung & Guskey, 2010).

After establishing explicit indicators of product, process, and progress learning, teachers then assign separate grades to each indicator. In this way, they keep grades for responsibility, learning skills, effort, work habits, or learning progress distinct from

Recognizing that merging diverse sources of evidence distorts the meaning of any grade, educators in many parts of the world assign multiple grades. This idea provides the foundation for standards-based approaches to grading. In particular, educators distinguish among the *product*, *process*, and *progress* learning criteria (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

**Product** criteria are favored by educators who believe grading's primary purpose is communicating summative evaluations of students' achievement and performance (O'Connor, 2002). They focus on 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 products (e.g., reports, projects, or exhibits), overall assessments, and 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 this perspective, grades should reflect not only the final results but also how students got there. Teachers who consider responsibility, effort, or work habits when assigning grades use process criteria. The same happens when teachers count classroom quizzes, formative assessments, homework, punctuality of assignments, class participation, or attendance.

**Progress** criteria are used by educators who believe the most important aspect of grading is how much students gain from their learning experiences. Other names for progress criteria include learning gain, improvement scoring, value-added learning, and educational growth. Teachers who use progress criteria look at students' improvement over a period of time, rather than just where they are at a

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grades that represent students' level of achievement or performance (Guskey, 2002; Stiggins, 2008). The intent is to provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of what students accomplish in school.

Typically, the "achievement grade" is expressed as a letter grade or percentage that represents the teacher's best judgment of the student's level of performance relative to the explicit learning objectives for the class or course. Computations of grade point averages (GPA) and class ranks are exclusively based on these achievement or product grades. For non-academic factors such as homework, class participation, effort, and learning progress, teachers typically record numerical marks (e.g., 4 = *consistently*, 3 = *usually*, 2 = *sometimes*, and 1 = *rarely*). The development of rubrics helps make this process explicit for students and parents. For example, in the case of homework, teachers may use categories such as: 4 = *all completed and turned in on time*; 3 = *only one or two missing or incomplete*; 2 = *three to five missing or incomplete*; 1 = *more than five missing or incomplete*. The key is to ensure that students understand the various performance levels so they know exactly what the mark signifies and what must be done to improve the mark (Guskey, 2006).

Teachers who report multiple grades for these different criteria don't have to worry about how

to weight or combine the grading evidence. This avoids difficult arguments about the appropriateness of various weighting strategies. Reporting multiple grades also increases the validity, the reliability, and the fairness of the grading process. Furthermore, to the degree that classroom assessments of student learning are aligned with student learning outcomes addressed in large-scale state assessments, the relationship between product or achievement grades and the accountability assessment results will be much stronger (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).



**To make grades more meaningful, we need to address both the purpose of grades and the format used to report them.**

### **Best practices: Reporting**

Most states today have common standards for student learning that identify what students should learn and be able to do. Despite these common standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, few states have developed well-aligned and effective standards-based reporting forms that overcome multiple design and implementation issues (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). Kentucky, however, has initiated a statewide effort to develop a common, standards-based student report card for elementary and secondary grades (Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011). Kentucky also was the first state to start implementing the Common Core State Standards. The Kentucky experience in standards-based reporting shows us:

- Teachers need to know the domains or strands, clusters or organizing elements, and standards;
- Teachers need to base grades on explicit criteria derived from the clearly established learning standards that appear in the national standards; and
- Teachers need to clearly distinguish among product, process, and progress criteria in assigning grades (Guskey, 2009).

Furthermore, if the standards-based approach is

going to work for all students, the guidelines for reporting must consider how well it will reflect the achievement of students with disabilities and English language learners (Jung, 2009; Jung & Guskey, 2010). The end result is the transformation of the traditional approach into a standards-based report card that creates a straightforward link between curriculum and assessment.

### **Standards-based procedures**

The first step in any standards-based reporting is to develop a deep understanding of the student learning standards. From this, educators can develop the critical strands of standards that will be meaningful for reporting. Typically, three to five standards in a given subject are appropriate (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The goal is to develop reporting standards that mirror the strands in the ELA standards and the domains in mathematics standards.

In ELA, for example, teachers may consider the strands or subdomains of reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language. In math, teachers consider strands associated with operations and algebraic thinking, number and operations, fractions, measurement and data, and geometry. Some teachers might contend that the Common Core standards apply only to ELA and math. However, professional organizations in every subject area have established standards for student learning that are arranged in similar strands or subdomains. For example, the National Science Teachers Association and the National Council for Social Studies have developed their own standards; so have the national organizations for music education, physical education, arts education, and others.

Finally, success in grading and reporting will be augmented as Internet-based applications are developed that allow teachers to record student performance and tally it to determine grades. Such applications should be teacher friendly and include procedures for printing and distributing report cards.

### **Structure and format**

Standards-based reporting forms that include students' photographs add a personalized element to the reporting process. Other demographic information such as address, class, grade level, and school should be included as well. This demographic information is followed by the standards-based information about a student's school performance.

The look of the report card changes with the grade level of the student. For elementary report cards, each subject has specific content strands so teachers can provide separate grades for each. This requires teachers to keep more detailed records of student performance and so it gives parents and students more specific information about a student's learning

strengths and areas of needed growth. This process helps unpack the standards and also contributes to having more targeted supports for students, parents, and out-of-school organizations. Rubrics are developed to determine the marks for process learning goals related to preparation, participation, homework, cooperation, and respect.

Another possibility is to include process goals in sections labeled work habits, study skills, and/or citizenship. Finally, elementary school report cards need to include a section for description/comments with two components: (a) two or three sentences explaining more precisely the emphases of instruction during the grading period and (b) a sentence or two about a particular student's strengths and areas for growth. The more specific the suggestions, the more helpful they will be to students.

For secondary report cards, it is also important to personalize them with the names and photographs of each student's teachers. Merging the class schedule program with the reporting program is essential. As with the elementary report card, there is a section dedicated to academic achievement (product) grades for each subject area or course. These grades are used to determine course credit and to calculate GPA. The achievement grade must be based on the evidence of a student's academic performance and not include nonacademic factors related to work habits or class behavior. Standards are based on the strands or domains in each content area. In addition to reporting on academic achievement, process goals related to participation, cooperation, homework, and punctuality are developed. Rubrics should be available for students and parents/guardians. The description and comment sections include general statements for the class as well as individual comments about each student's performance.

Report cards at both the elementary and secondary levels should allow teachers to attach custom-scoring criteria for students who may be working on modified and/or accommodated standards. The specific strategies developed to support these modifications can then be described in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities and the Individual Student Plan (ISP) for English language learners. This, in turn, helps parents and youth organizations support the targeted response-to-interventions.

### **Implications for grading and reporting**

If assessments are graded and reported the right way, they can be a powerful tool for student learning. Classroom assessment practices that inform instruction will be invaluable as teachers work to implement the Common Core standards, which are meant to prepare all students for college and/or career. Grades

should be carefully computed and summary comments should be carefully formulated. Grades are most effective when they reflect *only* achievement. When grades include other aspects of student performance (e.g., effort or progress), they have less meaning as a summary of achievement.

### **Grading**

Based on countless interactions with teachers, we've concluded that the first step in sound classroom assessment practices associated with grades is to make them meaningful. The primary issue is to figure out how to weight and combine different factors into the final grade and summative comments. When the guidelines provided within the standards are applied, the problems associated with hodgepodge grading methods may be eliminated. The standards provide a sound alternative or grading system that can be used to replace traditional grading practices.

## **Standards-based grade reports begin by developing a deep understanding of student learning standards.**

The second element of the system is about identifying factors that relate to achievement in direct or indirect ways; teachers must decide what evidence best serves the purpose. Under the suggested system, teachers would assign separate grades for achievement, effort, and progress. Grades become more meaningful when separate grades are assigned for each category. Grades reflecting academic achievement are determined separately from undefined aspects of process and progress. The end result will be not only more meaningful grades but more useful grades that will inform teaching and learning.

### **Reporting**

Student assessment reports should be based on a sufficient body of evidence. In addition, student assessment reports should provide a summary of student learning in a clear, timely, accurate, and useful manner. Students, parents/guardians, and others with legitimate permission should be provided with assessment reports that accurately summarize what students have learned in the classroom. Report cards have the primary function of clearly communicating the level of student performance in relation to the attainment of the learning expectations for a reporting period. These reports should identify students' strengths and areas for growth and inform decisions concerning future class placement, retention/promotion, and admission.



Reporting should be meaningful for the educational teaching and learning process. A standards-based report card that creates a straightforward link between curriculum and assessment is required. This approach overcomes the problems of poorly aligned report cards. The suggested system helps ensure that reporting reflects students' progress on mastering state standards. The suggested reporting system involves the clear identification of curricular aims or learning objectives rooted in national standards. In this system, the final reporting standards are organized around strands or domains coming directly from the national standards. The reporting system also clearly

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identifies the product, process, and progress criteria so that the reporting can separate these factors and avoid hodgepodge grading. This approach also recommends taking advantage of Internet technologies, as well as structuring reporting to reflect the variety of needs of different school levels — elementary and secondary report cards should be designed appropriately. Early results from pilot implementation indicate that teachers and parents favor this standards-based reporting over the traditional approach.

#### **Conclusion**

It is time to change our traditional approaches for grading and reporting in our nation's schools. The scaling-up process of the suggested approach for grading and reporting will enhance student learning. Reporting must be valid, reliable, fair, and useful; nothing less should be expected if we want to link grading and reporting with students' mastery of content and practice standards. Standards-based grading and reporting has much more to offer over the traditional scattershot approach.

All grading and reporting should start by having a clear purpose, followed by an in-depth understanding of the various criteria that can be used. Equally important is the effort to explicitly link curriculum standards with grading and reporting systems. We are striving for consistency, validity, and fairness in grading and reporting practices. We are striving for enough detail to allow grading and reporting to serve as a road map of student progress in achieving their learning goals. This will assist us as we work to close the gap between current and desired states of learning and levels of achievement. Ultimately, grading and reporting are other important tools for what matters most: improving student learning. **K**

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