9-1-2014

Our Grades Were Broken: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges to Implementing Standards-Based Grading

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the barriers and challenges school leaders face as they implement a standards-based grading (SBG) system. The researchers used a multiple case study methodology to investigate how key school leaders described their implementation journey at three schools that differed in size, demographics, and location. Purposeful sampling was used to identify key administrators at three different schools who were in the process of implementing a SBG system. Data were collected primarily via semi-structured interviews. In the analysis, researchers used three phases: horizontalization, thematizing, and textural-structural synthesis. Each of the three schools had very different implementation stories. Barriers in the process included: student information and grading systems, parents/community members, the tradition of grading and fear of the unknown, and the implementation dip. This study suggests that implementation of SBG must be purposeful and well communicated. That is, in order to enhance the likelihood of success, an intentional plan with a reasonable timeline, ongoing professional development and collaboration, and effective two-way communication about the purpose of grading is needed. Also maintaining A-through-F final grades—even as they simultaneously implement more progressive assessment and reporting strategies—is often seen as a necessary concession. Finally, the authors explicate SBG's relationship to competency-based education and professional learning communities (PLCs).

1. Introduction

Listen to Randal Peters and Thomas Buckmiller discuss their paper on standards based grading, Drake University.

During a recent symposium on the topic of implementing standards-based grading (SBG) in schools, we were intrigued by a question from an audience member. The audience member, a principal, asked, "What are some examples of schools that have successfully implemented SBG?"

Standards-based grading, at least at the secondary level, is still a relatively new phenomenon. For a variety of reasons, there are few high schools that have successfully and comprehensively implemented SBG. And as we have found in this study, although a school may have cleared the hurdle of initial implementation, there are still many hurdles ahead with potential to derail implementation efforts. Thus we are not convinced there are many extant models of successful implementation…at least not yet. It is still early in the endeavor to align assessment and grading to our standards-based system, but there is much to be learned from the experiences of early adopters.

The purpose of this study was to better understand what it is like for school leaders immersed in the process of implementing SBG at their respective sites. In order to adopt SBG at the secondary level, issues such GPA, honor roll, academic eligibility, college admissions, valedictorians/salutatorians, and other long held traditions must be confronted. Progressive schools are beginning to intuit that these concepts, although familiar and important to parents and communities, are not as critical as effective instruction, assessment, and reporting.

2. Rationale

n recent years, some degree of consensus has arisen in the vast majority of states of the need to establish a "Common Core" set of educational standards to drive instruction and curriculum development. Concerns over the number of high school graduates unprepared for college and careers, as well as how far American students lag behind other countries, have played significant roles in this movement (Spencer, 2012). Standards-based (and the related standards-*referenced*) grading, which represents the assessment, measurement, and/or reporting of what students know and are able to do relative to these standards, is a logical extension of that movement, and allows teachers to provide clearer and more effective feedback when compared to traditional letter grades. Nevertheless, efforts to implement SBG have been slow in their development. While the SBG movement is gaining momentum among progressive educational leaders, it is a significant paradigm shift for students, parents, and even some teachers and school officials—a result of the "almost cult-like importance" (Olson, 1995, p. 24) of grades in our society—and thus is meeting with varied levels of resistance. This study will help schools leaders who are hoping to adopt SBG to better anticipate the challenges they may face and understand what strategies are being used to counter resistance.

3. Review of the Literature

Implementation theories

The movement toward nationally accepted standards, and to a lesser degree the adaptation of systems to communicate these standards, is indicative of a general trend of educational—and other nonprofit sector—entities taking on accountability practices that have heretofore been more common in the for-profit sector (Phelan, 2013). An intent underlying this study is to explore micro actions that are inherent to implementation of standards-based practice in school settings. Much recent inquiry has dealt with this microfoundational perspective; Powell and Colyvas (2008) noted the benefits of exploring "how employees transform institutional forces that guide their daily practice" (pp. 276-77). They advocated for efforts that lead to ways of capturing and maintaining these processes:

Language and vocabulary…are protocols that people use to achieve mutual understanding. The next step is to see which become codified into formal performance measures; these become metrics by which people are evaluated. As these activities take hold, they become accepted as normal, [then] emulated by others who were not a part of their initial creation. In this sense, local measures become [public], as they…evolve into models that others aspire to and are recognized as guideposts of accomplishment. (p. 292)

One theoretical lens for this, institutional theory, addresses the manner in which new structures become established guidelines for behavior—"how elements are created, adopted, and diffused over time" (Scott, 2004, p. 2)—and serves as a context to describe gaps between preferred and actual processes. A related concept, *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), describes what causes a unit in one population to resemble other units facing similar environmental conditions; this often results from an organization's quest for legitimacy. To Suchman (1995), the concepts are natural and meaningful elements that empower organizations. But the *type* of isomorphic pressure brought to bear on an environment can also impact the likelihood of successful adaptation. Coercive pressures, such as mandates from those upon whom a group is dependent, are less likely to be generally accepted; DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested that these result in "performance compliance rather than voluntarily inculcating of a performance culture" (p. 469). Mimetic situations, wherein organizations model themselves on peers with demonstrated success, are more freely chosen and predict greater potential for positive outcomes (Cyert & March, 1963). Mizruchi and Fein (1999) described these as social-constructionist processes wherein enough individuals in an organization begin to do things in a certain manner that the course of action becomes institutionalized. Normative pressure occurs when organizations must conform to industry standards; in such situations, personnel often either embrace the adopted system or are replaced. At any rate, there are few accounts of what happens before, during, and after implementation that impacts the efficacy of standards-based grading initiatives. A lack of awareness of this series of decisions and actions can open schools to a greater risk of failure in their reform efforts. Because their mission to affect student learning is challenged by limited resources and time for professional development, it is all the more essential that decisions concerning the implementation of new practices be well informed in theory and grounded in defensible practice.

Standards-based grading

"How is my child doing in school?" This question is one of the most basic, important, and reasonable questions a parent can ask. Grades and report cards represent a primary source of that information; indeed, as Olson (1995) noted, "The use of grades is one of the most sacred traditions in American education" (p. 24). Americans have a basic trust in the message that grades convey–so much that grades have gone without challenge and are highly resistant to change (Marzano, 2000). Yet traditional report cards that record only a single grade for each subject area do not offer sufficient detail (Guskey, 2001) to answer the critical question of "How is my child doing?" Unfortunately, according to Bailey and McTighe (1996), when a clear response to this question is not available, none of grading's other purposes can be effectively carried out. As Marzano (2000) has pointed out, our current system of grading is more than a century old and, even more improbably, has been carried out for that long without a meaningful body of supporting research. He also noted at least three inherent problems that have greatly limited its effective use by teachers. It has allowed them to: 1) include widely varying behavioral factors in the assignment of supposedly academic grades; 2) arbitrarily weight assessments; and 3) merge diverse knowledge and skills into single assessments scores.

In fairness, it should be noted that, because of a dearth of training and attention given to grading processes in teacher prep programs and imbedded professional development, much of what teachers do reflects the way it was done to them. Nevertheless, O'Connor (1999) pointed out that this is no longer acceptable, as he advocated for a general examination of grading practices and a challenge to long-held beliefs. Without such examination and debate, grades will likely continue to serve, as Dressel (cited in Kohn, 1994) characterized them, as "inadequate reports of inaccurate judgments by biased judges of the extent to which students have attained undefined levels of mastery of unknown proportions of indefinite amounts of material" (p. 201). For the time being, however, in spite of the general dissatisfaction with our young people's level of preparedness for college and careers, the status quo endures, leaving educators "painfully trapped between an outdated model of education that no longer works and a new model of education that doesn't yet exist" (Zmuda, 2010, p. 53).Parents are entitled to know their children's strengths and deficiencies, and interventions that can be undertaken at home to promote success, awareness made difficult by inaccurate assumptions about what a particular letter grade means. Reeves (2004) noted that grading systems may, in fact, change drastically from one classroom to another, since grades serve multiple purposes and are unique to each course or teacher. Teachers have routinely used grades to communicate, variously, effort, behavior, attendance, and participation in addition to achievement or growth. This is, of course, problematic, since serving so many purposes makes it difficult for one symbol, however familiar, indicate its meaning clearly and cohesively. Marzano (2000), in fact, suggested that traditional grades are so imprecise as to be practically meaningless. Specific examples of this, as Guskey (1996) has suggested, include assigning zeros to late or missed work, which is a reflection of student effort and organization, as opposed to learning. He noted that this can have an inordinately negative effect when combined with the practice of averaging,

since the resulting extreme scores greatly skew final grades (Guskey, 1996). Further, penalties for late work create disincentives for students to complete work and often cause them to miss important opportunities to learn. The result is, again, grades that inaccurately communicate students' actual performance. Such practices deter the most important objective of grades—that of providing information or feedback to students and parents. Research unquestionably supports the importance of feedback to specific learning goals. Hattie (1992, as cited in Marzano, 2000), in a comprehensive review of studies on learning and instruction, reported that providing students with specific information about their standing in terms of particular objectives increased their achievement by 37 percentile points.

Standards-based grading (SBG) is a defensible system for fair, accurate, and meaningful assessment of student work. Standards have become the foundation for aligning educational systems by bringing focus to curriculum development of what students should learn and skills they should acquire. Further, SBG allows for a more nuanced conversation between parents and teachers about where students are strong, where they are weak, and how parents can help them (Spencer, 2012). Therefore, it is critical that teachers link assessments to clear, pre-established criteria/standards. A standards-based report card that includes grades or marks based on carefully articulated learning standards provides families with the specific feedback they require to ensure that improvement efforts are appropriately focused and more likely to succeed (Guskey, 2001). Detailed rubrics can serve as scoring guides and assist both teachers and learners in the process, as they address the need to directly assess how well students are developing toward meeting the course standards or objectives. According to O'Connor (1999), other practices and strategies that are increasingly being used to better align grading and assessment with standards include:

- Incorporating more formative work that is not included in final grades (making every assignment summative can inhibit students from learning, taking risks or being creative, as they become overly focused on accumulating points instead).

- Updating grades frequently: learning is a continuous process; and the quality of learning should take precedence over *when* it occurs.

- Discussing assessment and grading with students at the beginning of instruction, since a primary objective of education is to have students become self-evaluating.

Guskey (2001) advocated for the use of standards-based report cards because of their focus on learning targets, provision of appropriate feedback, and enhanced likelihood of successful interventions. Guskey, Jung, and Swan (2011), in studying standards-based pilot programs in Kentucky, found teachers and families nearly unanimous in their agreement that standards-based reports provided better and clearer information. Though teachers indicated that completing standards-based report cards required more time, most indicated that the quality of information they provide made the extra effort worthwhile.

A growing consensus seems to be that it is time to deemphasize traditional grades, to better align and systematize the grading process and refocus on the learning and progress of individual students (McTighe, 1997). As Reeves (2004) noted, fairness should be the transcendent value upon which educational decisions are made, and student achievement in a fair system should relate to meeting a standard versus:

wading through mysterious, changing expectations. [While there is value in freedom and creativity for teachers], it does not extend to the "freedom to expect less of children or to ignore standards established as the essential requirements for student learning (p. xiv).

4. Research Methods

A qualitative case study methodology was used for this research. Researchers collected data via semi-structured face-to-face interviews—lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each—with building administrators at three schools where SBG was being implemented. The primary research questions were: What does the SBG implementation process look like? Further, what were some of the barriers to implementation and what strategies did you employ to overcome these?

In an attempt to triangulate the data, the researchers attended a full-day SBG statewide symposium hosted by one of the schools in the study and a workshop conducted by one of the nation's leading experts in the field. Additionally the researchers took notes in their field journals through this study. The insights, reflections, and thoughts were useful in the analysis of the data.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify key administrators at three different schools who were in the process of implementing a SBG system. Each of the three schools were quite distinct: one smaller, high achieving school near a university town; one large, urban, highly diverse school; and one in a large, growing suburban district. Per IRB approval, the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed by either the researchers or a research assistant. Pseudonyms were used for all people, schools, and locations in this study.

5. Data Analysis Procedures

With regard to thematic analysis, the researchers employed three main phases. First, the researchers utilized the process of horizontalization, working through the transcribed data systematically, giving full attention to each item and identifying interesting aspects that formed repeated patterns. Patton (2002) described this process as "the data [being] spread out for examination" (p. 486).

The next iteration of analysis involved the process of thematizing the data in order to come to grips with the greater structure and meaning of the text (van Manen, 2003). In this case, the process meant clustering invariant constituents of the data from the

research experiences into thematic labels. This logical shift from the raw data, which included the participants' original language in separate transcribed documents, to the newly created thematic descriptions (still divided by site, but in a single electronic document) was accomplished through both individual and shared analysis (Polkinghorne, 1989) in order to better triangulate and audit the data. These new themes, structures of experience (van Manen, 2003), captured important aspects about the data in relation to the research questions and represented a more refined level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The final analytical step was to employ a textural-structural synthesis, which integrated previous themes and descriptions into an account of the ranges of experiences representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, our analysis sought to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the challenges and solutions of the study participants who were undertaking the process of leading SBG implementation.

6. Findings

The findings briefly describe the implementation narratives of three different schools. As evidenced by the lack of empirical evidence surrounding the topic, the SBG concept is still relatively new and the extent to which the implementation "worked" or not may be inconclusive. At these three schools it could be argued that it has worked to the extent that teachers and administrators thought it gave the assessment and grading of the learning process more credibility through clear and precise targets, multiple attempts at success, and better feedback. The findings do not represent an in-depth account of each school's implementation effort, but rather the process is described in overview form.

Sojourn High School

Sojourn High School is a modern, well-equipped, grades 9-12 building with 350 students. Located in a small town of just over 2,000 residents, in proximity to one of the state's universities and larger metro areas, it is a high achieving school with a predominantly white, middle class demographic whose graduates traditionally matriculate in large numbers at post-secondary institutions.

Wayne Hopkins, the principal at Sojourn High, holds the rare distinction of leading a high school after having spent the majority of his career at the elementary level. This has proven significant, as standards-based grading (SBG) tends to be much more widely practiced in the early grades. Hopkins' level of experience and understanding of SBG, along with deep learning, professional discussion, and practice on the part of key faculty members at SHS, has led to "the stars being aligned" for such an initiative, in the words of school leadership.

The origin of Sojourn High School's SBG journey started when Scott Holland, a high school science teacher, attended a conference session on SBG and quickly became enamored of its logic. Intent on trying some of the ideas in his classroom, he experimented with various components and simultaneously began having conversations with Alex Rhodes, a colleague and physics teacher in his department. The two initiated a book study and soon the entire department was experimenting with and implementing aspects of standards-based instruction and assessment. Administrators, noting that students from the department were talking positively about SBG, initiated a larger conversation, through book studies and discussion, about better assessment and grading. Ongoing discussions surrounding these issues, according to Holland, (one of the early adopters and currently the district curriculum director), centered on trying to help colleagues understand why the current system was broken. It's rough when you go through a second order change; you really have to have a deep understanding of why you're doing it so that, when questioned, you're not as likely to waiver.

Holland noted that a teacher has to ask him or herself,

"Why am I asking that specific prompt?" From a management perspective, if I'm grading [something] and it has nothing to do with the standard, I quickly realize that it's not a good use of my [or students'] time. And I really think that's helped us expedite the process of creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

Early on, the administrative team was supportive of the concept of widespread adoption of SBG. Aiding this acceptance was Hopkins' professional background at the elementary level (where teachers were more apt to use SBG) as opposed to a more tradition-bound, content-oriented environment, and the fact that Holland, one of the early adopters, was soon elevated into a leadership position (curriculum director).

School leaders quickly recognized that faculty members were using two different grading systems, which was problematic because it raised fairness and consistency issues. The establishment of a timeline for all teachers to begin SBG followed this realization. Hopkins acknowledged that this may have circumvented some of the usual consensus building and led to concerns that the initiative was being implemented too quickly, but stressed that it was time to move. He said, "I think it was the right pace. If we had not [jumped in], some staff would have kept dragging their feet…Sometimes the hardest part is just deciding when to start." Additionally, when the administrative team hired new people, they looked for a readiness to handle this paradigm shift. As the SBG concept gained momentum and was eventually adopted as formal policy, a few teachers left the district because of ideological differences. The next step was to move toward greater institutionalization; after a more comprehensive investigation of standards-based grading, administrators approached the school board about the prospect of formalizing SBG in policy. Hopkins said:

Having the Board approve [SBG] was really the key step for us. Once they approved it, we started working on implementing it building-wide. [It] was a shift when we finally said, "Everyone is going to use this way of grading." [Since then] our professional

development has been focused on implementing five grading guidelines [separating academic performance from behavior, allowing late/re-submitted work, while eliminating zeros, extra credit, and grading of homework].

The school leadership team was intentional in its approach to helping the community understand the premise of SBG, and continued the use of letter grades on report cards and transcripts to lessen the effect of the paradigm shift. Administrators and teacher leaders provided a host of clear guidelines, rationale, policies, and practices on their website and engaged in the conversation whenever and wherever they could. The school hosted multiple information sessions and even an SBG conference, which was attended by teachers and administrators from across the state. Despite these efforts there was still a clear disconnect for some parents and community members.

Although Sojourn has established itself as a leader in SBG and undertaken a wide array of measures to educate the community, subsequent school board elections reflected that a level of dissent remained. In the years since SBG was formalized, most faculty and parents have become proponents; however, a small but vocal group made a latent push to populate the board with members committed to removing it from policy. These candidates were not elected, and the policy remains in place for the foreseeable future.

Naples High School

Naples High School is a large, urban high school with around 1,350 students in a metropolitan school district. It is a highly diverse school, ethically, racially, and linguistically, with over 20 distinct languages (and many more dialects) spoken in its hallways and students' homes. Just under a third of students identified themselves as White, with similar numbers identifying as Black and Latino, and fewer than a 10th identifying as "other." Over three-quarters of the student body received free or reduced lunch. In recent years, a number of progressive, highly motivated teachers, administrators, and staff, with a commitment to improving urban education, have chosen to relocate to the school, with the effect being a boost in positive energy and school climate.

Naples High is in its first year of standards-referenced grading implementation. The school recently experienced success as a turnaround site; not long ago, it was labeled as persistently low achieving but upon receiving a multi-million dollar improvement grant, hired several school improvement leaders and initiated a 1:1 computing initiative with extensive professional development and instructional strategies to support it.

Since then, Naples High has made solid gains in test scores and other indicators of success. Not wanting to rest on their laurels, school and district leaders strove to determine the origins of these results. While initially a peripheral issue, the conversation turned to a discussion of grades. Administrators in the district office did some correlational studies and determined that the classroom level grades were not predictive of ACT scores and other standardized tests. In essence, there were large numbers of students who were doing poorly in school (as indicated by grades, credit completion,

and graduation rates) but who achieved comparatively well on standardized tests. As school and district leaders delved more thoroughly into the issue at the classroom level, they discovered remarkable inconsistencies with grading polices, which they increasingly identified as significant and problematic. The school's vice principal, Mark Jacobs, provided a typical example:

There'd be a 200 point assignment and a 10 point assignment in a the grade book and when we looked at them more closely, we said "[That] 10 point assignment seems to be a better determining factor…of student learning than the 200 point packet of worksheets that are all about completion and essentially being a good student —not a good student as far as learning but as far as completing work."

Jacobs expressed dismay that they were "losing kids early in the semester," and suggested that the effects of poverty exacerbated the process when a student missed a day or two of school:

In a poverty-impacted school like ours, a lot of parents are working and, even if they are at home, some of them haven't done algebra or calculus or chemistry. Heck, *I* couldn't help my kid with some of that stuff. If students could not complete the make-up work—some of which was just busy-work—and got a zero,it would kill their grade…and finally they'd just throw in the towel.

Using standards-based grading with a four-point scale and getting rid of zeros made sense from the perspective of fairness of grading. According to Jacobs, school leaders asked 'Why does a zero have a five times more negative impact than [any other grade]?' Jacobs continued:

We need to keep that light of hope, that flame, burning…as long as possible, so that our kids don't feel like, "I have so much work, I'm in such a hole; there's no way, no matter how hard I work, that I can climb out of it."

Since Naples High's teaching faculty were generally viewed as progressive, central office administrators identified the school as a strong candidate to begin the process of implementing a new, more consistent grading and assessment strategy. In fact, there was already a small pocket of teachers who had begun experimenting with SBG.

Ultimately, however, the decision to implement SBG at Naples was entirely an administrative one. The leadership team felt that delaying the process would actually hurt kids and so they began moving decisively toward a rapid implementation timeline. School officials mandated practices that would separate behavior from grades, de-emphasize homework, and encourage retesting and resubmission of work.

In an unconventional version of implementation strategy, Naples High administrators did little in the way of book studies or building consensus among the faculty. Nor did they do a campaign to inform parents of the change. The rationale was that, since final

reported grades would still be letter grades, the shift in assessment at the classroom level could be characterized as a lesser, internal order of change.

In a bold move, on the last day of the school's academic year, the principal gave teachers the following options: 1) start the SBG process at the beginning of the next year (during August professional development sessions); 2) start during the second semester; or 3) file for a transfer to another school within the district, assuming they were not on board with the process. In response, the majority of teachers changed their grading practices and gradebooks to reflect SBG philosophy at the beginning of the new term.

Jacobs, now the school's principal, indicated there has not been much pushback yet from parents. He noted, "Our teachers have done a good job of explaining it to them, so I've had maybe three phone calls all year from [parents angry about] standards-based grading." Jacobs pointed out that, in every case, after a brief conversation, the parents expressed appreciation for the change and backed down from their criticisms.

Jill Michaels, associate superintendent of curriculum for the district, said once they came to the conclusion that, "Yes, our grades are broken and we know our system needs to improve," they launched headlong into the process. Michaels noted emphatically that they directed building leaders and teachers to "focus on beliefs and on mindset, and let [central administration] worry about logistics." The district collaboratively developed a framework for implementation, including a FAQ section, with the significant guiding practices including examples and non-examples. This also helped to establish common language and consistent responses.

Westside Middle School

Now in year three of implementing SBG, Westside Middle School took on the issue of standards-based instruction and reporting with a thoughtful, tiered progression. The plan was to inform parents through open forums, emails, and conversations: starting with SBG in sixth grade during year one, adding seventh grade during year two and eighth grade in year three. The goal of moving away from traditional A-F grades has been contested by parents and the community throughout the implementation. Principal Amy Johnson said the move to SBG was initiated by the teachers in the building and was a result of their PLC work. As teachers reflected on PLC concepts, common assessments, and what they wanted students to know and be able to do, the conversation shifted to the fact that they were not reporting to parents in a way that truly reflected what students had learned in school. Johnson, a third year principal at the school, indicated the process started with a discussion around separating behavior from academics for more accurate reporting. She said,

When you see a B on a report card, what does that mean? Was it a case where the students did the work well, but turned in some of the assignments in late? You just can't tell. We wanted to provide more descriptive feedback to the students and parents.

When Johnson came to Westside, the process of SBG implementation was already in progress. Mike Anderson, in his second year as associate principal, was a teacher at the school when they began planning for and implementing SBG. He said, "It started with a conversation; an idea. And then, all of a sudden it grew—at least that's how it worked here." He characterized the move towards a new, systematic way of reporting as "organic and grassroots." Johnson said that the process was guided by the administration, but gained momentum as a result of teachers who engaged in a critical dialogue concerning more effective ways of evaluating students. She noted that principals can expose teachers to an idea, "but the fire for it won't come unless the teachers see meaning in the work; true value in what they are executing."

The faculty was not a barrier in implementing SBG; Johnson estimated that almost all current teachers were "on board;" that there were "no holdouts…on staff who don't believe in it. Sometimes they just need help in managing or reporting it. Or [in answering,] 'What does that look like for me?'" The high rate of teacher buy-in was a result of three years of professional development around the issue of better assessment. Another factor was a large number of new teachers in the building during the transition.

During Johnson's first year at Westside, a pivotal year in the implementation process, there were 33 new staff members. Located in one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, the hiring boom provided an opportunity to shape the staff with a favorable orientation to SBG. Johnson said,

In our interviews we actually printed a rubric, gave them some time to digest it, and then asked how they would instruct or extend it. We wanted to see if they could look at the rubric, comprehend what it was about, and put together some thoughts.

During implementation, the principals indicated that most teachers were using standards-based *instruction*, without necessarily doing standards based *reporting*. Standards based instruction uses ideas such as retakes, no zeros, rubrics, and precise feedback, valid principles whether reporting letter grades or standards.

Anderson said that they spent a lot of professional development time discussing grading practices, rubrics, meaningful tasks, standards-based classrooms, impact of zeros, and the gamut of unquestioned issues associated with student assessment and reporting. The principals were careful to distinguish the difference between instruction and reporting; although a symbiotic relationship exists between the two, using the former without the latter is sometimes an essential compromise of implementation.

An interesting macro-level barrier surfaced on the school's path to full implementation. During the summer prior to the start of year three, when the eighth grade was supposed to adopt SBG, the school board prevented the change by mandating the continued use of traditional letter grades.

The researchers visited the school shortly after staff learned that the board would not support standards-based reporting in the eighth grade, as originally planned. The principals indicated that the faculty was extremely disappointed, since most were already using standards-based instruction in their classrooms. Anderson added, "They (teachers) are tired of [keeping] this behind the scenes, they know it's the right thing to do, the kids like it and they like it as teachers." Johnson indicated that the board's unwillingness to validate the SBG philosophy was disheartening: "There is definitely a feeling of defeat—what did we do wrong? But I think they will be fueled to think about whom they need to educate and how to do that; it [reignited] that grass roots effort again."

The administrators were hesitant to speculate on the rationale behind the board's decision but one possible explanation was that the district's exponential growth is likely to result in a new building soon housing an eighth-ninth grade configuration. Since the high school (including ninth grade) is currently not considering SBG, a grading conflict might be avoided. Another possible explanation is that some vocal opponents in the community have successfully advocated against the new grading philosophy.

Johnson also noted that the board may not be ready to begin the SBG conversation at the secondary level because of the many implications associated with GPA, class rank, athletic eligibility, honor rolls, and Carnegie units. Johnson's staff has worked to educate the board on SBG concepts but Johnson also stated,

Traditional grading has been around a long time; it's safe to people. And non-traditional grading at the secondary level scares people; it's unknown. People are [worried] that we're not preparing kids for college. They like to have the bumper sticker that says their child made the honor roll.

Above all, the principals reiterated the teachers' ongoing commitment to the SBG processes: "We can't turn back," Johnson said. "I could take you to Ms. Ainsley's eighth grade classroom, they speak the SBG language. It's about working kids through a growth mindset; it's about always making themselves better, and less about getting an 'A'".

7. Discussion

Three schools, three different implementation stories

Of the three sites, Sojourn High's strategy was probably the most textbook case of reform. Teachers discovered the practicality and importance of SBG on their own and advocated for its use to the administration. The administration was highly supportive, as the principal came from the elementary school ranks and the curriculum director was a former teacher who had been instrumental in SBG's early adoption. School leaders made a concerted effort to engage faculty through PD and the parents and community

members through dialogue, discussion, and open forums. But in spite of this confluence of positive indicators, a school board election threatened the movement's existence.

Naples High School's (and its district administration's) approach of proceeding in an understated manner has worked without much resistance to date. The leadership decided unilaterally to pilot SBG in a high school that appeared "ripe" due to progressive teacher attitudes and momentum from a recent successful turnaround. A more organized response against the initiative may emerge as it is propagated throughout the district. By all accounts, Westside's progressive, yet deliberate and step-based, approach was on the path to full implementation, but the process stalled at the middle school. Now, as other nearby districts have begun the process of implementing SBG at the *high school* level, the resulting pressure may move Westside to re-examine its feasibility and approve expansion. In the meantime, teachers and building leaders remain steadfast that it is the "right work" and continue to build the rationale for adopting better, more precise grading.

Clearly, then, each of the three schools in this study used distinct implementation strategies. Returning to the issue of the best model for adopting SBG, the initial findings suggested no single correct, or most appropriate, route to implementation. Instead, it appeared that the specific context and climate of the school and its community must be considered before settling on the strategy most conducive to a change in grading practice. In addition, those charged with leading the change must be well versed in the rationale for, and underlying foundations of, SBG, and must have a deep contextual understanding of the resources and readiness of one's building or district. And there is certainly a benefit to understanding some of the potential barriers that other schools have faced, as well as strategies that have been useful in countering these challenges.

Barriers

Schools in this study identified and described a number of barriers to implementation. Principals must anticipate these issues and proactively confront them; for a variety of reasons, they are largely unavoidable challenges that must be met head-on, with thoughtful, well-reasoned, and practical strategies (Guskey, 2009).

Student information and grading systems

One of the more pedestrian—yet daunting and universal—challenges to effective and comprehensive standards-based reporting is that grading software and related online student information systems have not yet sufficiently evolved to accommodate SBG. Most of the administrators interviewed in the study, and practically every teacher or leader from other SBG districts with whom we've spoken, have singled out information and grading systems as significant impediments, largely because the most available and commonly used programs continue to use points and percentages to calculate and report grades. This runs directly counter to standards-based practice, which abstains from accumulating points on a percentage scale in favor of formative feedback, most recent assessment of student achievement, and four point rubrics aligned with learning

targets. One teacher at Sojourn High went so far as to create and market a standards-specific grade book since, like many districts, have found it necessary to "trick" the system to accommodate standards-based grades. At any rate, it seems evident that until widely used and comprehensive student information and reporting systems begin to offer legitimate alternatives to percentage-based frameworks reporting only traditional letter grades, standards-based grading efforts will continue to be at a distinct disadvantage.

Parents/community members

At Westside and Sojourn, both located in affluent communities with a large number of college-bound students, small but vocal groups of parents and community members have gone to great lengths to contest the implementation of standards-based grading systems. Far and away the largest single concern expressed by parents at the secondary level was the perceived threat SBG initiatives might pose to post-secondary opportunities. Sojourn's principal, Mr. Hopkins related a widespread belief that, without traditional GPAs and class ranks, students would be at a disadvantage when it came to college admissions and scholarships:

I don't fault families for that; I don't have college-aged kids. But they are so consumed with a 3.85 as opposed to a 3.75; they don't care how students get that. I tell parents all the time, "Your kid will get into college, but that's not why we're here—we're here to make sure they get *through* college."

These parental concerns pushed Hopkins to begin holding conversations with university admissions personnel, who acknowledged that GPA and class rank were not always reliable indicators of collegiate success. In cases of schools where class rank was not calculated (such as SHS), one state university admissions director shared that student records were dealt with manually, as opposed to using the usual formula: "We have hundreds of grading systems that vary widely among all the high schools that we work with," he pointed out. "When one of those indicators is missing…our staff members review the academic records using a holistic approach." When Hopkins followed up by asking about the best way to communicate their students' performance to post-secondary institutions, the director responded, "I think most would be interested in knowing that you have removed the variables that inflate grades. [In our case], we trust that the grades from your high school accurately represent learning."

The tradition of grading and fear of the unknown

Much of the aversion to SBG by all parties involved appears to relate to the long-standing use of, and familiarity with, traditional letter grades and perhaps simply anxiety about the unknown. It is an oft-cited fact that practically everyone taking part in the making of decisions about SBG—teachers, parents, administrators, and board members—is a product of traditional grading methods. Any move to standards-based reporting requires often-contentious discussions about such issues as academic awards (e.g. honor roll, valedictorians, etc.) and athletic eligibility. Since these have always

been influenced to a degree by effort, attendance, homework completion, and participation, what are the implications of separating these behaviors from purely academic performance? As Brookhart, S.M. (2011) noted, schools attempting to alter their grading systems must deal with teachers' beliefs, long-standing habits and experiences, not only concerning grading but also learning, discipline, and classroom management. One of the administrators in the study pointed out:

I think it's a fundamental problem in our education system that teachers, myself included, were never taught about fairness of grading. That's kind of a revelation, at the high school level. You set up the grade book you want, without any conversation about how important that is or what you're really doing. It's just your personal, arbitrary evaluation system of the kids.

Finally, in spite of the fact that many college admissions personnel have accommodated standards-based report cards, there exists the larger issue of SBG being an outlier, as well as the fact that the process appears to be entirely absent from the majority of college campuses. One of the high school principals we spoke with noted,

My biggest concern for standards-based grading [has to do with] the lack of preparation and acknowledgment from universities…I honestly think that college entrance should be all about coursework and conversations. Because, if that happens, you don't have the issues you now have with people worrying, "Oh, my GPA, my ACT score!"

Implementation dip

Another aspect of transitioning to standards-based grading and reporting that must be considered is that of an inevitable implementation dip. Because it replaces a process that is the only one that most teachers, students, and parents have ever known, many interviewees cited a number of changes that elicited unintended—and occasionally negative—initial effects. For instance, because this type of grading entails a de-emphasis of graded, scored homework in favor of formative feedback, the received message is often that homework is no longer important. The truth is, of course, more complicated than that, but it takes time for the message—that ongoing formative practice and assessment is a foundation of SBG—to be adequately conveyed. Another frequent area of initial discontent for teachers is the practice of allowing re-submission of work and retakes of tests and quizzes. This is generally resolved as school personnel find appropriate compromises that allow students to redo critical work (as is often the case in the adult world) while not placing an undue burden on teachers.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

As this study illustrates, in spite of the extensive advocacy for standards-based approaches by growing ranks of respected educational leaders and authors, the logic of SBG's alignment with Common Core State Standards, and the positive results

experienced by many of its early adopters, additional implementation and adherence to such systems will continue to pose formidable challenges. It is within the context of, and in order to facilitate resolution to, these challenges that the authors submit the following conclusions, considerations, and connections.

Implementation of SBG must be purposeful and well communicated

The adoption and implementation of SBG is a difficult endeavor, even under optimal conditions, as one school's efforts demonstrated. With this in mind it is evident that, in order to enhance the likelihood of success, an intentional plan with a reasonable timeline, ongoing professional development and collaboration, and effective two-way communication about the purpose of grading is needed.

Teachers, as Sojourn's Holland noted a need to have a place for "safe, honest conversations about their beliefs, coupled with collegial agreements to try new things and see how they inform those beliefs." Some of the most profound lessons that have come out of such experimentation with standards-based models are those of teachers who have witnessed first hand their tendency to improve relationships with students and parents, and empower students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, improve their academic performance, and become better prepared for life after high school.

Successful transition to SBG must involve building a sense of urgency and mission around these essential objectives of education—and that the work of learning for a lifetime and having ongoing, constructive conversations about learning in collaboration with others is the *right* work. Based on the schools we observed and the people we interviewed in this study, actively taking part in the discussions and practice surrounding SBG appears to require—and perhaps facilitate—this growth oriented mindset or disposition that holds great potential to engage both students' intellect and emotions.

In the end, the prospect of returning to traditional grading was to Sojourn's Hopkins, like most of those who have embraced SBG, anathema. When confronted with this scenario, he stated emphatically: We *can't* go back. Let's say the Board just wiped this out and said we are not doing it anymore. Not only would I not be here, I…have teachers who would say, "I'm not going to teach in the system that we did previously." For me, that's a sign that we've done some things pretty well. My leadership team and staff have said: "This has been the hardest I've ever worked. I feel like a new teacher, and I would never be able to go back and make the mistakes I did before. They would think it unethical to go back…which I find really interesting. This tendency to question the ethics of staying with traditional grading (knowing what we know now) or to recoil at the prospect of returning to a "broken" system of assessment and reporting was a common theme among interviewees in the study. Administrators or teachers at all three sites reported a desire to accelerate the process once it became clear that failing to do so would be harmful to kids, in almost the same way that medical researchers conclude studies prematurely when early results suggest an inordinate benefit to one group of participants. Given these comparisons and the still-widespread failure to question the

status quo of traditional grading when the Common Core is fast becoming a de facto set of national standards, it is conceivable that SBG proponents may soon raise claims of educational malpractice.

Concessions to convention

To teachers and administrators implementing SBG at the high school level, maintaining A-through-F final grades—even as they simultaneously implement more progressive assessment and reporting strategies—is often seen as a necessary concession. This is in response to parental qualms about college admissions—which, as noted earlier, are to some degree unfounded—and too deeply rooted and questionable to conventions like GPA-based honor rolls and eligibility requirements. To most of these educators, such concessions are seen as necessary steps in the right direction, potential battles to be avoided in the interest of winning a more important war. Don't get hung up on the report card, goes the argument; it is only one means of communicating with parents and thus should not receive inordinate attention.

However, it may be worth revisiting this defense—however temporary—of traditional letter grades. Given the deep and universal identification that our culture has with these symbols, can the established value judgments, behavioral implications, and associated stigmas that accompany them ever be left behind? If the answer is negative, then it may also be time for a critical discussion about the defensibility of continuing letter grades and, conversely, the merits of extending the 1-4 rubric or some other means of communicating performance. We are, of course, in a transitional phase and it is understandable that standards- based instruction and assessment would, as it has in many settings, precede standards based reporting. Nevertheless, a purely standards-based system would likely report out in the same performance language as most rubrics in order to facilitate communication and, when this apparent best practice is subverted only for the purpose of appeasing the change-averse, it must at least be questioned. It is conceivable that it will take a generation of those who were not indoctrinated in traditional grading systems before the full transition occurs. But, the question remains: Is this a valid delay in institutionalizing the process of SBG? Perhaps the more pressing question is whether or not continuing to use traditional grades will limit the integrity of a more justifiable system.

SBG's relationship to competency-based education and PLCs

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the future of education is moving toward an approach wherein students will advance through their schooling based of demonstration of proficiency of competencies. Some may advance further than in a traditional academic year, while others may take more time, but learners at all levels will have additional opportunities for intensive instruction or enrichment, as appropriate. Many of the school leaders in this study identified SBG as a powerful and essential complement to this goal. According to one district administrator,

Standards-based grading is a logical [step] on the journey to CBE. Competency-based education is why we started on this path. That's the end goal—each student progressing through the system at their personal learning pace. It seems like standards-based grading—although a big jump for a lot of places—is a safer initial landing spot on the spectrum of competency-based. Others we interviewed cautioned against moving too quickly down the philosophical and practical path towards a competency-based model, questioning whether the emphasis is on competency-based education going faster, deeper; or both? Scott Holland of the Sojourn district opined that, "when competency-based education is floated around, it's more often…about [demonstrating mastery] *faster.* There are not many such systems that are known, at least from my understanding, for going the deeper route."

Regardless of the pace or nature of this impending change, it seems likely that advances in technology, accountability for more fully individualizing student learning, isomorphic pressures from the business realm, and competition from innovative educational models will lead to a more competency-based future. By all accounts, successful adaptation of a standards-based grading and reporting approach is seen as at least an invaluable complement and essential first step in accomplishing this, if not an end unto itself. As more schools become engaged in the work of true professional learning communities, SBG *and* CBE are increasingly being offered as critical elements of the broader response to the essential PLC questions (DuFour & Marzano, 2011):

- How will we know if our students are learning? How can we check for understanding on an ongoing basis in our individual classrooms?

- How will we respond when students do not learn? And how will we enrich and extend learning for students who are proficient?

9. Broader Implications and Recommendations for Future Inquiry

While there are multiple implications of implementing standards-based systems — including many that we may not even fully encounter until the process is brought to a larger scale—one of the more delicate issues is that of the influence of class and socioeconomic status on a community's receptiveness to SBG. At first glance, the most strident complaints and vociferous opposition have come from parents of highly competitive, college bound students, who are concerned that their children's opportunities to gain entrance to the best schools might be compromised by an alternative grading and assessment format. One of the administrators from an urban environment appeared to reinforce this line of thought:

One thing I will say is that we have the luxury of a staff, students and the community trusting us, but if you try to do this in some of your more affluent areas, because of what we talked about—those "A" kids not really, truly being "A" students—that's where you're going to get your fight.

Anecdotal accounts in the districts studied seemed to bear this out to some degree; while the number of student failures across the board were down, there was also a slight dip in the number of "A's," presumably because of the previous tendency of students with "proficient" levels of accomplishment to have had their grades inflated by behaviors such as homework completion, extra credit, and good behavior in class. While this is no doubt a legitimate short-term concern on the part of parents, it must be weighed against the potential of SBG to provide a more accurate account of actual student understanding and performance.

At the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, standards-based assessment and reporting may actually hold some potential to narrow the devastating, well-documented, and considerable achievement gap between minority and low SES students and their peers. If, as suggested by many of those in this study, students' grades are often not indicative of their actual abilities—if their low GPAs, credit deficiencies, and diminished graduation rates are in fact a function of becoming disenfranchised by early failures, unassailable homework and test score deficiencies caused more by attendance and other behavioral issues than lack of skill—then it could at least be argued that enactment of SBG is an academic fairness, and even social justice, issue, as well.

Finally, given the paucity of previous empirical research on standards-based grading along with what is likely to be its exponential growth in coming years, it seems incumbent on the educational research community—along with multiple partners in the practitioner realm—to begin a thorough examination of the outcomes of SBG models. This will no doubt require conversations about common vocabulary, definitions, and constructs, as well as longitudinal gathering, monitoring, analysis, and publishing of consistent indicators, data, and results. Without these actions, SBG (and any subsequent iteration) is unlikely to gain the requisite validity, gravity and, ultimately, support that is necessary to establish it as a permanent fixture in the educational landscape. Certainly, while those in higher education are taking part in this important inquiry, the SBG community would be well served by efforts to inject similar practices and conversations into their own classrooms and departments. Discussions with university admissions and financial aid personnel are also likely to further awareness and enlightened practices with regard to students coming from high schools with standards-based grades and report cards, presenting alternatives to traditional GPAs and class ranks.

In the final analysis, while the consensus of those interviewed for this study is that standards-based systems are inherently and highly defensible improvements over their predecessors, the jury is still out on the most viable and beneficial frameworks for their implementation. For instance, while SBG-traditional letter grade hybrids are generally considered to be necessary political olive branches, additional research and thinking need to be devoted to whether such uneasy truces are more or less likely than complete departures from traditional formats to advance the cause of student learning. Clearly, readiness for SBG that emerges from grassroots, organic, professional conversation and learning on the part of staff—as opposed to policy imposed by administrators who see it as a necessary best educational practice to be implemented with all due haste—

are scenarios with different implications and situational realities. In the end, however, we share Zmuda's (2010) bafflement by

the certainty with which educators [say] what can and can't be done, what the system permits and disallows, and what students are capable of and have no shot at becoming. So many educators are resigned about what schooling has to be because they cannot see it for what it is: a set of habits that feel permanent but do not have permanence. (p. 5)

SBG, to us, has the feeling of a practice with the potential to overcome one habit of heretofore unquestioned, entitled, and harmful permanence.

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