FOUR STEPS
in Grading Reform

Thomas R. Guskey and Lee Ann Jung

The field of education is moving rapidly toward a standards-based approach to grading. School leaders have become increasingly aware of the tremendous variation that exists in grading practices, even among teachers of the same courses in the same department in the same school. Consequently, students' grades often have little relation to their performance on state assessments—an issue that has education leaders and parents alike concerned. Such inconsistencies lead many to perceive grading as a distinctively idiosyncratic process that is highly subjective and often unfair to students.

Complicating reform efforts, however, is the fact that few school leaders have extensive knowledge of various grading methods, the advantages and shortcomings of those methods, and the effects that different grading policies have on students (Brookhart, 2011a; Brookhart & Nitko, 2008; Stiggins, 1993; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2011). As a result, attempts at grading reform often lack direction and coherence and rarely bring about significant improvement in the accuracy or relevance of the grades students receive.

Effective grading reform requires four steps. Although each step addresses a different aspect of grading and reporting, all of the steps are related. Together, the four steps are the foundation of grading policies and practices that are fair, meaningful, educationally sound, and beneficial to students.

Be Clear About the Purpose

One of the major reasons that school leaders run into difficulties in their attempts to reform grading and reporting is that they fail to identify the purpose of grading. Enamored of the promise of new online grade books and reporting software, they charge ahead without giving serious thought to the function of grades as communication tools. In particular, they fail to consider what information they want grades to communicate, who is the primary audience for that information, and what outcome they want to achieve. As a result, predictable problems arise that thwart even the most dedicated attempts at reform.

Compounding the problem, parents, teachers, students, and school leaders typically see report cards serving quite different purposes. Some suggest that those differences stem from the conflicting opinions about the report cards' intended audience. Are they designed to communicate information primarily to parents, students, or school personnel?

> As standards-based curricula and assessments are implemented, grading practices must also change to be meaningful and fair.

Although a variety of purposes for grades and report cards may be considered legitimate, educators seldom agree on the primary purpose. This lack of consensus leads to attempts to develop a reporting device that addresses multiple purposes but ends up addressing no purpose very well (Austin & McCann, 1992; Brookhart, 1991, 2011a; Cross & Frary, 1999). The simple truth is that no single reporting device can serve all purposes well. In fact, some purposes are actually counter to others.

For example, suppose that nearly all students in a particular school attain high levels of achievement and earn high grades. Those results pose no problem if the purpose of the report cards is to communicate information about students' achievement to parents or to provide information to students for the purpose of self-evaluation. But that same result poses major problems, if the purpose of the report cards is to select students for special educational paths or to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs.

To use grades for selection or evaluation purposes requires variation in the grades—
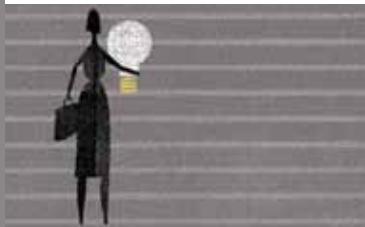
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and the more variation, the better! For those purposes, grades should be dispersed across all possible categories to maximize the differences among students and programs. How else can appropriate selection take place or one program be judged as being better than another if all students receive the same high grades? Determining differences under such conditions is impossible.

The first decision that must be made in any reform effort, therefore, is determining the purpose of the grades and report card. The struggles that most school leaders experience in reforming grading policies and practices stem from changing their grading methods before they reach consensus about the purpose of grades and report cards (Brookhart, 2011b). All changes in grading policy and practice

must build from a clearly articulated purpose statement, which should be printed on the report card itself so that all who look at the report card understand its intent. When a clear purpose is defined, decisions about the most appropriate policies and practices are much easier to make.

Use Multiple Grades

Another issue that poses a significant obstacle to grading and reporting reform is the insistence that students receive a single grade for each subject area or course. The simplest logic reveals that this practice makes little sense. If someone proposed combining measures of height, weight, diet, and exercise into a single number or mark to represent a person's physical condition, we would consider it ridiculous. How could the combination of such diverse measures yield anything meaningful? Yet every day, teachers combine evidence of student achievement, attitude, responsibility, effort, and behavior into a single grade, and no one questions it.

In determining students' grades, teachers frequently merge scores from major exams, compositions, quizzes, projects, and reports 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 those categories (Guskey, 2002a), which they then combine in widely varied ways (see McMillan, 2001; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). The result is what researchers refer to as a "hodgepodge grade" (Cross & Frary, 1999).

Another more meaningful approach is to offer separate grades for product, process, and progress learning criteria (Guskey, 2006; Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

Product criteria reflect what students know and are able to do at a specific point in time. In other words, they reflect students' current level of achievement. Evidence of meeting product criteria comes from culminating or "summative" evaluations of student performance (O'Connor, 2009). Teachers who use product criteria typically base grades on final examination scores; final reports, projects, or exhibits; overall assessments; and other culmi-

nating demonstrations of learning.

Process criteria are emphasized by educators who believe that product criteria do not provide a complete picture of student learning. They contend that 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. So do those who count classroom quizzes, formative assessments, homework, punctuality turning in assignments, class participation, or attendance.

Progress criteria are based on how much students have gained from their learning experiences. Other names for progress criteria include learning gain, improvement scoring, value-added learning, and educational growth. Teachers who use progress criteria look at how much improvement students have made over a particular period of time, rather than just where they are at a given moment. As a result, scoring criteria may be highly individualized among students. For example, grades might be based on the number of skills or standards in a learning progression 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, 2012).

After establishing specific indicators of product, process, and progress learning criteria, teachers then assign separate grades to each set of indicators. In this way, they keep grades for achievement separate from grades for responsibility, learning skills, effort, work habits, or learning progress (Guskey, 2002b; Stiggins, 2008). This allows a more accurate and comprehensive picture of what students accomplish in school.

Reporting separate grades for product, process, and progress criteria also makes grading more meaningful. Grades for academic achievement reflect precisely that—academic achievement—and not some confusing amalgamation that's impossible to interpret and that rarely presents a true picture of students' proficiency (Guskey, 2002a). Teachers also indicate that students take process elements, such as homework, more seriously when it's reported separately. Parents favor the practice because it provides a more comprehensive profile of their children's performance in school (Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011). The key to success in reporting multiple grades, however, rests in the clear specification of the indicators that relate to product, process, and progress criteria. Teachers must be able to describe how they plan to evaluate students' achievement, attitude, effort, behavior, and progress. Then they must clearly communicate those criteria to students, parents, and others.

Change Procedures for Selecting the Class Valedictorian and Eliminate Class Rank

The third step involves challenging a long-held tradition in education. Most school leaders today understand the negative consequences of grading on the curve. They recognize that when grades are based on students' relative standing among classmates, rather than on what students actually achieve, it's impossible to tell if anyone learned anything.

Most school leaders also see that grading on the curve makes learning highly competitive for students who must battle one another for the few scarce rewards (high grades) awarded by the teacher. Such competition discourages students from cooperating or helping one another because doing so might hurt the helper's chance at success (Krumboltz & Yeh, 1996). Similarly, teachers may refrain from helping individual students under those conditions because some students might construe this as showing favoritism and biasing the competition (Gray, 1993). School leaders may fail to recognize that other common school policies yield similar negative consequences, such as calculating students' class rank on the basis of weighted GPAs and selecting the top-ranked student as the class valedictorian.

There is nothing wrong with recognizing excellence in academic performance. But when calculating class rank, the focus is on sorting and selecting talent, rather than on developing talent. The struggle to be on top of the sorting process and then chosen as class valedictorian leads to serious and sometimes bitter competition among high-achieving students. Early in

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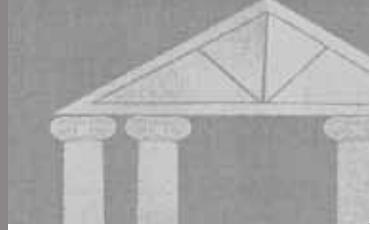
their high school careers, top students analyze the selection procedures and then, often with the help of their parents, find ingenious ways to improve their standing. Gaining that honor requires not simply high achievement; it requires outdoing everyone else. And sometimes the difference among top-achieving students is as little as one-thousandth of a decimal point in a weighted GPA.

Ironically, the term *valedictorian* has nothing to do with achievement. It comes from the Latin, *vale dicere*, which means "to say farewell." The first reference to the term appeared in the diary of the Reverend Edward Holyoke,

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president of Harvard College in 1759, who noted that "Officers of the Sophisters chose a Valedictorian." Lacking any established criteria, the Sophisters (senior class members) arbitrarily selected the classmate with the highest academic standing to deliver the commencement address.

Within a few years, most colleges and universities moved away from competitive ranking procedures to identify honor students and, instead, adopted the criterion-based Latin system, graduating students cum laude, magna cum laude, and summa cum laude. Most also altered their procedures for selecting a commencement speaker, using such means as student votes and appointments made by faculty members on the basis of not only grades but also involvement in service projects and participation in extracurricular activities.

More and more high schools today are moving away from competitive ranking systems and adopting criterion-based systems similar to those used in colleges and universities. Rigorous academic criteria are established for attaining the high honor categories, but no limit is set on the number of students who might attain that level of achievement. Schools that establish such policies generally find that student achievement rises as more students strive to attain the honor. In addition, students begin helping each other gain the honor because helping a classmate can actually help, rather than hinder the helper's chance of success. Instead of pitting students against each other, such a system unites students and teachers in efforts to master the curriculum and meet rigorous academic standards.

Recognizing excellence in academic performance is a vital aspect of any learning community. But such recognition need not be based on arbitrary criteria and deleterious competition. Instead, it can and should be based on clear models of excellence that exemplify the highest standards and goals for students. (See Guskey & Bailey, 2010.) Educators can then take pride in helping the largest number of students possible meet those rigorous criteria and high standards of excellence.

Give Honest, Accurate, and Meaningful Grades

The fourth step in effective reform of grading and reporting is to ensure honest, accurate, and meaningful grades for exceptional and struggling learners. Of all of the students in a school's population, those who have disabilities or who are struggling learners have the most to gain from a standards-based approach. For those students, intervention decisions depend on having clear and complete information on their performance.

But moving to standards-based grading presents a serious challenge. By removing nonachievement factors from grades, all of the common grading adaptations that teachers typically make for such students are no longer available. Teachers cannot add points for effort, weight assignments differently, or use a different grading scale. Teachers no longer report on a student's overall performance in a subject area, but on how the student performed on a specific skill or strand of skills. For many struggling or exceptional learners, this change could result in a failing grade. But receiving a failing grade on a standard that the team has already agreed is unachievable provides no information about how that student is progressing.

In response to this challenge, we developed an inclusive grading model (see Jung &

Figure 1

Example Language Arts Section of a Report Card with Modified Standards

	Marking Period			
	1	2	3	4
LANGUAGE ARTS	B*			
Reading	3*			
Writing	3*			
Listening	3			
Speaking	4			
Language	4*			
* Grades marked with an asterisk are based on modified expectations. For additional detail, please see the attached progress report.				

Guskey, 2007, 2010, 2012) that educational teams use to modify the skill or standard being measured. Teachers then use the same grading practices for all students, but for those who are significantly behind grade-level expectations, teachers report students' achievement on the level of work they are able to complete. This way, students and their families understand that the students' achievement is not on grade level, but they also have specific information about how they are progressing toward the grade-level standard.

Consider, for example, an eighth-grade student who is reading on a fourth-grade level. Instead of assigning that student a failing grade on the eighth-grade language arts standards, the student is graded on a modified expecta-tion. (See figure 1.) The educational team identifies a plan for reducing this student's gap between performance and the grade-level expectation. A part of this plan involves de-termining modified standards for this student, including appropriate objectives on the most important language arts skills. At the end of each reporting period, the language arts teacher grades and reports achievement on the modified expectations. If the student met the modified standard, then the grade that corre-

sponds with meeting the standard is assigned.

In grading on modified standards, it is ab-solutely necessary that the report card clearly communicates that the grade is based on modified expectations. Teachers should include additional detail with the report card that out-lines what was measured, describes what inter-ventions were used, and elaborates on the data collected. In determining language for tran-scripts, it is important from a legal perspective that nothing identifies a student as having a disability. Noting that grades are based on a modified expectation on a transcript is legal and good practice. Using words such as "special education" or "IEP," however, is not legal nota-tion (Office of Civil Rights, 2008).

For leaders in secondary education, imple-menting the inclusive grading model requires district and state-level support, because the model requires that schools note when stu-dents are not on grade level and that schools make modifications and offer interventions to any student needing them, not only students with disabilities. The inclusive grading model certainly does not lower expectations for stu-dents in any way. In fact, the opposite is true. By being transparent about where students are, schools make themselves accountable to em-

Although the numerous decisions that must be made when revising report cards may seem daunting, the four components of grading reform are the most important first steps.

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ploy evidence-based interventions and demonstrate progress toward grade-level standards. Every school has a percentage of students that is not achieving at grade level. But offering the level of transparency needed to address this issue will require courage on the part of key leadership.

Summary

Grading reform is a necessary piece of the move toward a standards-based orientation to education. The preceding four steps are vital to successfully revising grading and reporting systems. Although the numerous decisions that must be made when revising report cards may seem daunting, the four steps we've described will be vital to success. The shift to a standards-based education is rapidly taking shape, and by taking those initial steps, education leaders can ensure that their grading and reporting systems do not lag behind the greater standards-based movement. **PL**

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