Imagine a student named Johnny, who earns the following grades in a unit on surface area:

- Homework Completion: 50 percent
- Quiz: 60 percent
- Test: 100 percent

Because Johnny initially did not understand surface area, he did not complete the homework and did not do well on the quiz. After the quiz, he asked his grandmother, a former math teacher, to explain the concept. With her help, he finally understood surface area, which explains his sudden improvement on the test.

Now imagine another student, Jane, who scores 100 percent on all three activities. In a traditional grading system, which student, Johnny or Jane, earns a better grade? Jane, of course. Both students demonstrated the same level of understanding on the summative assessment, but Johnny was penalized for struggling initially.

During my first several years as a high school math teacher, the difference between Johnny and Jane frustrated me. Was it right for Johnny to earn a lower grade when he had in fact mastered the material, just not as quickly as Jane?

Homework gave me fits, too. How much emphasis should I give it? I tried giving students credit for the number of problems correct, the number completed, and various hybrids in between. I even assigned a few problem sets that would be worth 100 points—as much as a test—to see if it would change the value students placed on practicing math. No matter which method I chose, the same students completed their homework (and the same students didn’t).

A New Standard for Grading

During my fourth year of teaching, I attended a state conference for math teachers and learned two axioms that changed my practice to one centered on standards-based grading.

Axiom 1. Report learning targets rather than assignments, assessments, and behavior.

Before standards-based grading, my grade book could be described as a timeline of completed activities and assessments written in ink: 10 points for a worksheet, 30 for a quiz, 50 for a test. My new grade book was more of a barometer of student learning goals written in pencil. Each student’s current level of understanding for each standard was recorded using a four-point scale, with four representing the highest mastery level. As students demonstrated greater mastery, the recorded level changed.

I gave students a copy of the course standards so they could track their progress toward mastering the concepts. Parents and students could log in to our online student information system and see the specific areas of strength and areas that could benefit from improvement.

I calculated students’ final grades by determining their overall mastery of the standards. For example, if students were expected to master 10 standards in the course and a student earned nine 4s and one 3, that student earned 39 of 40 possible points, which translates into a percentage of 97.5 or an A on the report card. As Marzano (2000) suggests, I did not include effort, behavior, or attendance in the overall grade.

Axiom 2: Value what students learn over when they learn it.

To accommodate both the Janes and the Johnnys in my classroom, I started...
giving students who did not demonstrate an understanding of a concept an opportunity at a later date to show they had closed the learning gap. Because learning does not always take place on a predetermined schedule, it’s important to value what students learn, regardless of when they learn it.

For example, when Yolanda’s level of understanding of the Pythagorean theorem was below proficiency on her Friday test, she was able to do a second assessment the following week. She earned this opportunity by completing one or more preapproved activities: doing additional homework problems, attending an individual or group tutoring session, or creating a video explaining the concept. These activities provided an opportunity for additional learning and practice, and the choices gave her ownership of the process.

Support from Administration
My principal supported the changes in my classroom and suggested several books that might provide additional learning and guidance. To my amazement, Marzano (2000); Earl (2003); Guskey and Bailey (2001); and Wormelt (2006) were speaking my language. I quickly learned that changing classroom assessment is the beginning of a revolution—a revolution in classroom practices of all kinds. . . . Getting classroom assessment right is not a simplistic, either-or situation. It is a complex mix of challenging personal beliefs, rethinking instruction, and learning new ways to assess for different purposes. (Earl, 2003, pp. 15–16)

One example of how my grading practices revolutionized my instructional practices was in the role of beginning-of-class exercises. Previously, these were largely for classroom management, a way to keep students focused on work as I took attendance and managed other administrative tasks. But they became a way to efficiently gain a better understanding of students’ misconceptions. In addition, mid-unit quizzes were no longer graded and instead served as structured opportunities for students to receive feedback. These quizzes also helped me plan instruction by revealing which concepts students did not yet understand.

The following year, three science teachers, one Spanish teacher, one health teacher, one social studies teacher, one business teacher, and I formed a 10-week study group to study grading reform. One science teacher was hesitant to allow students to take a test a second time because she feared students would not try on the first attempt. The Spanish teacher questioned how these ideas might work in a foreign-language classroom. But after much discussion and reading, all the teachers in the study group began to implement one or more
aspects of standards-based grading. In the third year, interest grew, and an additional science teacher and an English teacher joined us.

After several years of standards-based grading work, I accepted an administrative role in the district. By then, that small contingent of high school teachers had expanded and spilled over into our middle school. However, the increasing number of teachers using standards-based grading began creating other issues. We had one common class taught by two teachers who were using drastically different grading practices. In addition, a growing number of students were asking teachers who had not yet moved to standards-based grading why they could not have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding.

We had reached a tipping point.

**Building a Rationale for Change Districtwide**

During the 2011–12 school year, the administration shared with the community our goal to study standards-based grading at all grade levels. Our elementary school had had a standards-based report card in place for the previous 20 years, although many teachers in the district may not have recognized it as such. The early-adopting high school and middle school teachers formed an informal grassroots support system for those who questioned the feasibility of the change.

At the secondary level, we wrestled with our often inconsistent grading practices and with what letter grades tell us about student learning. For example, what does a B mean?

- Does the student understand 85 percent of the concepts?
- Does the student understand 100 percent of the concepts but didn’t turn in 15 percent of the assignments?
- Does the student understand 90 percent of the concepts but turned in an assignment late?

**Was it right for Johnny to earn a lower grade when he had in fact mastered the material, just not as quickly as Jane?**

- Does the student understand 75 percent of the concepts but turned in a few extra credit crossword puzzles?

  While the faculty talked about grading, a group of administrators, teachers, and students shared their experiences with a community advisory committee. Students who took classes from a teacher using standards-based grading candidly shared the pros and cons of this approach from their perspective. I provided several articles to increase board members’ understanding of these shifts. “Seven Reasons for Standards-Based Grading” (Scriffny, 2008) resonated with many of our staff and board members and provided common talking points among administrators, board members, and teachers.

**Moving Toward Implementation**

At the culmination of our district study, we asked teachers to rate their level of agreement with and readiness to implement the following proposed guidelines, which were based on ideas we’d gleaned from such authors as O’Connor (2009) and Wormeli (2006):

- Entries in the grade book that count toward the final grade will be limited to course or grade-level standards. (Exceptions will be made for midterm or final summative assessments, which are limited to no more than one per nine-week period.)
  - Extra credit will not be given at any time.
  - Students will be allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of classroom standards in various ways, including retakes and revisions.
  - Teachers will use multiple points of data, emphasizing the most recent, to determine grade book entries, and will provide evidence to support their determinations.
  - Students will have multiple opportunities to practice standards independently and receive feedback through homework or other class work that is consistent with classroom standards. Practice assignments, including homework, will not be included as part of the final grade.

  Eighty-two percent of teachers surveyed indicated they had either started implementing the grading guidelines or were willing to make the changes with more time and support.

  I proposed a two-year tiered implementation timeline. In the first year, professional learning at the middle school and high school would focus on implementing the grading guidelines, and all middle school and high school teachers would implement the grading guidelines with at least one of their classes by the beginning of the fourth quarter. In the second year, middle school and high school teachers would implement the grading guidelines in all classes at the beginning of the school year. After discussing the topic at two meetings, the board of education unanimously approved the guidelines and implementation timeline.

**Thoughts on the First Year**

At the end of the 2012–13 school year, the first year of implementation, 75 percent of high school students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed...
with the statement, “Overall, I have an understanding of where I am in my learning and the areas in which I need to continue to learn.” More students are also seeking out ways to improve their learning of specific standards. We have seen the conversation between students and teachers shift from “How do I improve my grade?” to “Can you help me better understand this standard?”

Our district’s transition to standards-based grading has not always been smooth. Several teachers who were concerned about making the changes midyear voluntarily accelerated the first year of the timeline and began the new practices in at least one class at the start of the first year. Questions and concerns have bubbled up from staff, students, and the community.

Understanding of the guidelines was not as consistent as it might have been, and we’ve made some revisions along the way. For example, we began emphasizing the need for both teachers and students to initiate reassessment opportunities, and we worked to more consistently communicate with parents and students about the reassessment process and timelines. As we’ve work through the challenges, our teachers, administrators, and board of education have remained committed to moving forward with a transition that we believe will better reflect what students have actually learned in our schools.

References

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