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Advocating For Standards-Based Grading In A Suburban School District: A Policy Advocacy Document

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ADVOCATING FOR STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL
DISTRICT: A POLICY ADVOCACY DOCUMENT

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
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Document Origination Statement Digital Commons @ NLU

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on a vision for “what ought to be,” in this case, a new grading system in a suburban district. The document takes the reader through numerous aspects of advocating for district-wide policy change. The vision for a new grading system is evaluated from several perspectives, such as: educational, economic, social, political, and moral, and ethical. Using publications and research from numerous practitioners, it was determined that a change to standards-based grading is the right decision for this district. This policy advocacy document shows the reader how to work through policy change from the beginning to the end, including: the vision for success, making an argument, steps for implementation, and the assessment plan to monitor progress. Each step is discussed in detail to ensure success of implementation. A proposed budget is included in section five. The final product gives the reader a representation of what it takes to advocate an educational policy change to a school district.

PREFACE

Most schools have a practice or policy in place that is not supporting students as well as it could. That may not mean the initial policy was poorly designed or that it is ineffective. However, things do change; new research is discovered, and new ideas are shared, all of which may lead to a new policy for a school district. In this case, the proposed policy is to change from a traditional grading system to standards-based grading. Many school districts across the country are making a similar change. The traditional grading system had its purpose, but the increase of student data available and a focus on learning standards make it the right time for change. The standards-based system is better, and the transformation is the right decision. Changing policy is not a simple process and requires attention to detail in several areas.

This was the perfect topic for me to choose for many reasons. One reason is that the school district I work in is currently thinking about making this change. A second reason is it makes sense for any school district to move to a grading system that is better for students. In addition, grading and reporting learning has become a passion of mine. There can be many inconsistencies in grading: it can be subjective, and many times it becomes a social justice issue. Although it is not a research topic discussed in this document, research has been done to show that certain groups of students receive higher overall grades for reasons that have nothing to do with their academic abilities. Instead, their high grades may come from looks, demeanor, charisma, or even how much their parent challenges the teacher. These are many of the reasons that I have become interested in grading. The standards-based system does not eliminate all of the potentially biasing factors I listed, but it minimizes many of those concerns.

The focus of the policy advocacy document is to take the reader through all aspects of the process that makes up advocating a grading policy change. The focus of the advocacy is on doing what is best for students. The vision for success is proposed. The vision articulates not only what the new policy will do, but also what success will look like. Section two details the needs of stakeholders from several perspectives. The decision to change to standards-based grading is validated in the “Analysis of Need” in Section two. There is also an implementation plan, a proposed budget, and an assessment plan in sections five and six. Throughout the process of researching and writing this document, nothing caused me to question the value of changing to standard-based grading. It is a sound decision, and this document will help the reader realize it may be the right fit for their district.

I learned several lessons from a leadership perspective during the time I spent working on this Policy Advocacy Document. Most importantly, I learned how important attention to detail is while working on major change. You cannot take people’s feelings for granted, and it is helpful to put yourself in other’s shoes. Parents and teachers both will have strong feelings about moving away from a system that they have spent their whole lives using. A leader must take this into account and be patient with people. Listening and seeing things from the perspective of all stakeholders is another valuable lesson for future and current leaders in education. Overall, the time and effort spent on the policy advocacy document has been a great experience.

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SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

Grading and reporting are essential assessment processes in schools at all levels. Students, parents, and teachers need to receive an accurate representation of what a student knows to account for growth and support. Standards-based grading focuses on the process of learning; students and parents receive feedback that is specific to learning objectives in individual subjects (Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2007; Heflebower, Hoegh, & Warrick, 2014). A student may receive a respectable overall classroom grade in math in a traditional grading system; however, he may struggle in a certain aspect of the subject. Standards-based grading will help the student, parent, and teacher more clearly identify areas that require further attention (Scriffiny, 2008).

A typical traditional grading system is based on a 100-point scale (or percentage) that is converted to letter grades as a result of the number earned on the scale. Research has shown that this method of grading and reporting has several inefficiencies. For example, the traditional method of grading may not reflect accurate academic performance due to extra credit and good behavior (Vatterott, 2015). Many situations exist where students can prove understanding of academic material through assessments and at the same time “fail” classes due to not turning in homework, misbehaving in class, or having poor attendance. Similarly, students can receive elevated grades in classes even though they cannot demonstrate the same high marks on assessments in those classes. This becomes a problem when parents and students believe they have achieved honor roll status when in fact they could benefit from further practice and learning to improve their knowledge in certain subjects. The need for a proposed change in the grading policies in Maple Creek Consolidated School District #93 (MCCSD #93) was recognized as an

outcome of two years of research on homework and grading practices at the Middle School (Lee) and throughout the entire district (Huisman, 2015).

Awareness of Policy Issue

Two years ago, I became aware of several students who received failing semester grades at Lee Middle School when they were demonstrating mastery of content on classroom assessments and nationally normed academic tests. After informally collaborating with teachers regarding why this was happening, I discovered that the majority of failing grades were the outcome of failure to submit work. Students who were not submitting work received zeroes on the missing assignments. These low grades distort a student's grade well below the number 59 which is the beginning of the "F" category.

As a result, a program evaluation was conducted at Lee Middle School (Huisman, 2015). The goal of the program evaluation was to analyze how students' grades were affected by homework procedures. Surveys were presented to teachers and students, and group interviews were convened with teachers and two groups of students from the school. The recommendations from this program evaluation resulted in several changes at Lee Middle School. New practices were instituted concerning late-work procedures and the percentages that homework and assessments could contribute to a final grade. These improvements were moving the grading system at Lee in the direction of measuring students' proficiency on clearly defined learning objectives: standards-based grading.

In the fall of 2015, a survey was presented to every teacher in MCCSD #93. Nearly half the teachers in the district completed the survey. Teachers from the district, representing elementary, middle, and high school later participated in a group interview.

The results from the survey and group interview reflected that teachers recognized a need for a change from the traditional 100-point scale. Eighty-two percent of teachers surveyed stated that a standards-based system would more accurately report what their students know. Teachers agreed with researchers that student learning is enhanced when progress is reported using a standards-based system. The combination of two separate sets of survey data and several interviews with students in 2014 and with teachers in both 2014 and 2015 reinforced the awareness that there were concerns with grading and reporting in MCCSD #93 that needed to be resolved.

Critical Issues

The need for further action at Lee Middle School remains as students continue to receive grades that do not represent their knowledge of standards. In some cases, these are students with low grades who are testing in the top half of their class on nationally normed standardized tests. On the other hand, certain students are performing in the below-average range of proficiency on standardized tests, as well as classroom assessments, yet they are receiving A's and B's on their report cards. Students may go through elementary and middle school while they and their parents believe that they are at the top of their class due to factors that have nothing to do with academic achievement (such as participation, effort, and extra credit), not knowing they need additional support in certain subjects.

The traditional grading system is so imprecise and inconsistent that it is hard to use it to make data-driven decisions (DiSibio, 1971; Marzano, 2000). Many times, there is no clear purpose for grading in school systems; Lee Middle School and MCCSD #93 are no different. Teachers use personal biases and systems they learned as students to

grade their own students instead of using research-based practices. This is not done from malice but rather is due to the neglect of higher education to present best practice-grading systems. Although there are teachers at Lee who use research-based grading methods, many teachers have unique, specific systems that give weight to behavior and compliance. These issues attest that a change in official grading policies needs to be made in the district.

Policy Recommendation

I am recommending a change from traditional grading to a standards-based grading and reporting policy in MCCSD #93. The need for policy change was recognized at just one school in the district; however, the same issues exist at every school using traditional grading, the recommendation for policy change is a district-wide recommendation. This policy change will provide educational benefits to all stakeholders in the school district. Students can take ownership of their learning knowing they need to master standards, rather than earning grades that only partially reflect the degree of achievement. Parents and teachers will receive accurate information about learning progress that reflects what a student actually knows and can do. Standards-based grading is learning-focused; the system reports what students comprehend about learning standards for the learning content. In such a system, effort and behavior are reported separately (Brookhart, 2011). There are no longer single letter grades; students will receive specific oral or written feedback on multiple learning standards for each subject (Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2007; Heflebower et al., 2014). Common forms of reporting progress of knowledge use four different categories for each standard (Marzano, 2000;

Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Guskey, 2015). An example is listed in the chart below:

Figure 1: Example of a Student's Math Grade for One Standard.

	Below basic (1)	Basic (2)	Proficient (3)	Exceeds (4)
Standard #1			X	

School districts select assessment criteria that places students' scores into the four categories listed above. After students take an assessment, the teacher uses preselected rubrics or charts to mark the category into which the score falls for the selected standard (Heflebower et al., 2014). Some districts may choose to have three, four, or five different categories that communicate a student's progress on each standard.

Anticipated Policy Effect

The new policy requires teachers in the district to use a standards-based grading system to report student learning. The district will select priority standards for each grade level and subject area. Priority standards are those used to describe the standards the district selects to teach and assess learning (Heflebower et al., 2014). These priority standards are measured by common assessments constructed in grade levels and across subject areas. Each standard is shown on the report card sent home for students (Marzano, 2000; Marzano, 2010; Guskey, 2015). Based on their assessment scores, students will know where they stand in relation to mastering individual standards. Grades are ongoing and students have the opportunity to learn the material throughout the entire year (Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Vatterott, 2015). Unlike the current grading system, the new system uses a growth mindset, and students are not penalized for

one substandard test performance (Wormeli, 2001). Once the new policy is enacted, teachers and students will shift their focus to actual learning throughout the district.

The new policy addresses a number of issues associated with the current grading system. Currently, there is no clear purpose for grading; there are inconsistencies in implementing grading guidelines; and student grades do not accurately represent what a student knows and can do in each class. Individual teachers are successfully implementing consistent grading policies that accurately assess and report student knowledge, but this is not being done district-wide. A standards-based system can help alleviate each one of these problems.

Grading will become more consistent as teachers across grade levels and subject areas are reporting on the same standards throughout the district, using assessments they composed together to measure student learning. Varying policies about late work, behavior, and attendance will no longer be a concern as they are not part of the official grade. The purpose of grading is to report student learning and understanding using selected standards identified by the district. Common summative assessments will be a guide for student understanding of learning standards. The new system makes reporting student knowledge more accurate. Rubrics are used to make grading assessments more reliable. Inflated grades are no longer a concern with the new system, since students cannot use compliance and behavior as a way to improve poor assessment scores.

The new grading policy will have long-term benefits for students as well as everyone involved in their educational well-being. Students benefit by taking ownership of their learning with more knowledge of the assessment process, specifically learning objectives. Teachers can assist students and make data-based instructional decisions

knowing how each of their students is progressing. Classroom instruction can be paced differently with sounder knowledge of student understanding. Parents can support their students with the increased information they receive. The new standards-based grading policy in MCCSD #93 creates a growth mindset as opposed to a system based on a single final grade (Dweck, 2006). Student learning will be improved quickly when the new policy is adopted.

SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF NEED

The current grading problem has implications that reach far beyond academics. Although the current situation greatly affects student learning and motivation, it also impacts all stakeholders economically, socially, politically, and from a moral and ethical perspective. The traditional grading system creates an atmosphere where students aspire for a number grade that can be ranked against their peers. Instead, a new grading policy centered on the standards will change the mindset to one in which students compete with themselves to attain knowledge based on learning standards.

Educational Analysis

Standards-based grading will shift the way in which students and teachers regard teaching and learning. Growth and attainment of knowledge will be the new goal in MCCSD #93, as opposed to a system that uses multiple factors to create a number grade. Currently, grades are the result of several factors unique to each individual teacher. Recent years have seen more consistency at the middle school with the addition of a school-wide policy for the extent to which homework and tests count toward a final grade. However, there are still issues that do not sustain the continuation of learning that is supported by standards-based grading. In some classes there are not enough assessment opportunities to prove mastery of the curriculum; some subjects do not use common assessments; students and their parents may not receive a completely clear picture of the student's achievement; and there is no common policy for retaking assessments to substantiate achievement.

In an effort to shift attitudes toward a standards-based approach at the middle school, a school-wide committee has implemented a grading modification directing that all summative assessments will be worth 70 percent of a student's final grade. In a

summative assessment, students prove their learning of the material that was taught in class (Vatterott, 2015). This is a transformation more closely similar to a standards-based system where a student's grade is a reflection of their knowledge of academic material demonstrated through assessments. Standards-based grading will constantly appraise the individual's achievement of learning objectives as dictated by commonly held learning standards. Mastery of knowledge can be evidenced in many ways: through written assessments, in class projects, oral assessments, or through student speeches (Marzano, 2000). Learning can take place and be reported even after the assessment has been completed and graded because attainment of knowledge is fluid (Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Vatterott, 2015).

Common assessments ensure that teachers collect more reliable data to use during collaboration to improve student learning. When members of a subject area department all administer uniform assessment, these are known as common assessments (Heflebower et al., 2014). An example of a subject area department would be the eighth-grade math department (every eighth-grade math teacher in the school makes up that department). There are departments and grade levels in the district using common assessments; however, some are not. Without common test data, teachers cannot collaborate effectively (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). A standards-based grading system that uses common assessments will give teachers the opportunity to collaborate, making changes when appropriate. A more supportive professional learning environment takes place when everyone is analyzing the same data.

Again using the middle school as an example, a school-based committee made significant changes in 2015-16 with a great effect on student learning. However, there are

still inconsistencies of reporting grades to students, parents, and teachers. Summative assessments now contribute 70 percent of the weight toward a final grade. The variance takes place in the remaining 30 percent of a student's grade, which can distort their knowledge of learning material. There are still students failing subjects who have knowledge of the academic material because they are not completing homework or in-class work. Students can still average an 80 percent on assessments and fail a class if they do not complete homework or other activities assigned in class. The new grading policy will require the entire grade to derive from scores attained on in-class assignments and assessments. Parents and students will discern learning based on the student's performance in class. This creates a more knowledge-based grading system, demonstrating what students know as opposed to what they are doing (Brookhart, 2011; Vatterott, 2015).

Currently, if students have only two to four summative assessments in a semester, and they score poorly on one of them, their grade is impacted significantly and will not accurately represent their knowledge of standards. This has severe implications when 70 percent of a final grade comes from summative assessments. A district-wide test retake system will be part of the new grading policy. Students benefit from the additional opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. Learning is constant, and students should not be punished for a low score in the past if they have since met the learning objective (Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Vatterott, 2015).

Many progressive changes have been made at Lee Middle School with regard to grading and reporting, however there is still work to be done to accurately assess student knowledge. The entire school district is facing similar challenges. The new grading

policy of standards-based grading will help make this assessment accurate throughout the district. The addition of retakes, more assessments, and common assessments increases the validity of grading and reporting while demonstrating student learning as a continuum of growth.

Economic Analysis

The implementation of standards-based grading will not require a large financial input. Key cost factors involved in the implementation include the printing of report cards, book purchases for teachers, and the professional development required to train teachers. The most expensive of the three listed is staff training. Savings to the district will be realized when students are no longer retained in their grade level. The standards-based grading system will greatly reduce retention of students. Per pupil spending is around \$8,000 a year. The district will see savings of \$32,000 - \$48,000 if only 4-6 students a year are no longer retained.

PowerSchool is the online grading program and data storage system that the district currently uses. The program has a default that allows the district to record grades in a standards-based format. Therefore, this change will not have an economic impact on the district. The new standards-based report card, because it is a lengthier document, will require more printer ink and paper, however, this has no significant economic impact on the district. Two-hundred books will be purchased (one for each teacher) for a district-wide book study. The largest expenditure will come from training teachers and administrators in the principles of standards-based grading.

The largest sums of money will be spent in shifting teachers' and administrators' thinking to the standards-based mindset. Most standards-based systems use a scale where

students are placed into one of four categories based on their progress (see figure 1). The standards-based mindset involves principles of grading such as: not averaging grades, allowing retakes, removing homework and compliance from the final grade, and using proficiency scales to grade students. These principles will confront the way that many people think and believe about grading.

Averaging grades has been a method in schools for a long time, and it continues in most schools today. Allowing students to retake assessments is viewed by some teachers as a free pass, which allows students to neglect studying for a test the first time. Reporting homework and compliance separately is a shift for many people. Requiring students to complete homework and turn it in on time has been a fundamental practice in schools. Creating and using proficiency scales to grade will require greater time commitment and effort from everyone. This step alone can cost any school district money if it must pay teachers to work outside of school or hire substitutes so that teachers can work together and complete the scales during the school day. An outside consultant will be brought in to help shift the mindset of teachers, parents, and administrators who may need help in making the transition to the new system. Regardless, the amount of money needed to implement the new grading policy does not outweigh the lifelong learning benefits stemming from standards-based grading.

Social Analysis

The traditional grading system ranks students against each other at the secondary level, and also separates students on the basis of “honor roll” roll or not honor roll. On a traditional scale, students compete with each other. The traditional grading system favors students who have support at home. Students whose parents cannot assist them

academically, perhaps because they are working, fall behind and start to see poor grades, especially on homework that is not completed. Failing grades are detrimental for students who lack confidence or have anxiety toward school. Failing grades at the middle school level may result in required summer school, remedial courses, or even retention in the current grade level (retention means the student would have to repeat the grade level again the next school year). Students who already struggle in school or have little support at home may begin to loathe school and start to believe that school has no place in their lives. The standards-based system changes this concept for many students. Being aware of each standard to be mastered at their grade level increases student motivation (Marzano 2009; Heflebower et al., 2014).

Expectations for success are a critical part of the standards-based mindset. When students know what they are expected to learn, they typically rise to the challenge and push themselves beyond the point where they would have otherwise been (Dueck, 2014; Vatterott, 2015). The standards-based system leads to a learning environment where students compete with themselves to reach mastery of each standard. Students with disabilities are graded on a proficiency scale that fits their learning needs (Heflebower et al., 2014), as opposed to using the same scale as their regular education peers. A more supportive classroom environment can be developed when each student does not have to worry about what their classmate scores on an assessment, or about making the honor roll. Everyone in the class can pass the test and master the learning standard.

Accommodations may be needed to master the standard, or assessments may need to be given using different methods (Guskey, 2009). Socially, students are supported with a

standards-based grading model, removing the competitive nature that the traditional grading system creates.

Political Analysis

Changing grading policies will have political implications. The traditional 100-point grading scale has been used for a long time, starting at Harvard in the late 1800s. It was later adapted in 1897 at Mount Holyoke College into the modern letter-grade system similar to the one used today (Vatterott, 2015). The standards-based grading system is grounded in the learning standards. Learning standards became prevalent in the 1990s after the National Council of Mathematics released the first set in 1989 (Guskey, 2009). Since then, some grading systems have reported students' knowledge of learning objectives deriving from standards (Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2002; Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Vatterott, 2015). Nearly all educators, board members, and parents grew up using the traditional grading model, creating a familiarity with that system. Usually, the most involved parents have students on the honor roll; it can therefore be predicted that they are comfortable with the traditional grading system and may resist changing something they believe is working. Major political backlash is possible if the new policy is not implemented carefully.

Tammy Heflebower et al. (2014) suggest in their book, *"A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading,"* that a school district should plan on four years to make a complete change. For a change to be successful, teachers and administrators must be comfortable and prepared, and parents need to be informed. The Chicago Tribune published an article in June 2016 that cited several school districts in the Chicago area that had implemented standards-based grading and received much dissenting feedback

from parents who preferred the traditional grading system (Rado, 2016). There is no way to know what went wrong in each district, but the article demonstrates that a school district must think of every possible step it can to keep politics from derailing the implementation of a new grading system.

Four distinct groups need to understand and support standards-based grading to ensure support for the policy change: school board members, teachers, administrators, and parents. The new grading system must be presented to each group differently, although with the same goal, which is that they understand and support standards-based grading.

The school board should be consulted early and often about the proposed policy change since a policy change will not exist without its approval. District-level administrators, building administrators, and teachers should present to the school board together in order to display the united belief that everyone has in standards-based grading. Presentations will be strengthened by using examples of successful implementations completed by other peer districts in the area. Presentations to the board should include the objectives, benefits, and challenges of standards-based grading. School board support is needed for success. When dissenting voices rise up, the school board must feel secure with the change; otherwise, the new grading system will fail without the support of the governing body of the school district.

A survey of teachers and administrators can help understand perceptions about standards-based grading. In the case of MCCSD #93, the teachers and administrators completed an online survey together in the fall of 2015, and the majority agreed that standards-based grading is the most effective way to evaluate students (Huisman, 2016).

If a district has the clear support of teachers and administrators, professional development can support that momentum.

Even if the teachers, administrators, and the school board believe in standards-based grading, a confused and disagreeing group of parents can block implementation of a new policy. Parents want what they feel is best for their children. If the school district can provide credible evidence about why standards-based grading is the best system for their children, parents are more likely to support it. One way to help parents see the reasons for change is through periodic informational meetings during the year before the new policy is enacted. Bringing in an outside consultant who is an expert in standards-based grading is another way to build parental support (Heflebower et al., 2014). Hosting “coffee with the principal” is another avenue for parents to receive information about standards-based grading. Giving parents as much information as possible is the most effective way to smooth their transition to standards-based grading. If parents do not feel comfortable with the change, the atmosphere will be susceptible to negative politics.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

The traditional grading system requires students to complete work at home in order to be successful. More than half the students in the United States public-school system live in poverty (ASCD, 2015). Students who live in poverty do not typically have the same resources at home as students from more affluent households, who have more books in the home, more access to technology, parents who may have attended college or own a business - all traits more likely to create a household conducive to supporting success in the traditional grading system (Kohn, 2006; Vatterott, 2009). When schools continue to calculate homework and projects as a major part of a final grade, they create a

barrier for more than half the millions of students who attend public schools in America. Far from being malicious, most educators believe such assignments will inspire students to work at home and “rise above” poverty. This is an inspirational goal, but some students can manage the work on their own with little support, while others cannot. Schools should not assume that students will be able to rise above the barriers that are in place; rather it is we who must remove the barriers. It can be argued that the traditional grading system perpetuates poverty, by suppressing those living in poverty. Standards-based grading removes those barriers.

Standards-based grading relies on work that occurs in the classroom in order to assess students’ on-going learning. Work that is to be completed at home will be reported separately and does not affect the student’s grade. Homework is still given for practice and for preparation on upcoming exams; however it is not part of the student’s final grade. This levels the playing field and gives students who are less fortunate the same opportunities as students with resources and parental support, opportunities like access to advanced classes and memberships in academic organizations such as the National Junior Honor Society. From a moral and ethical standpoint, standards-based grading is a more equitable system.

SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

Section Three provides a description of the policy goals and objectives in detail. The new grading policy continues to serve the purpose of assigning each student classroom grades at the end of each quarter and semester. In addition, the new grading system will provide stakeholders with more detailed report of student achievement in regards to instructional objectives derived from the district's priority standards (Galveston Independent School District [GISD], retrieved 8/11/16). Fairness and equity are fundamental aspects of standards-based grading, and they are not primary concerns of the traditional grading system.

Policy Goal

Creating a reporting system that presents students, parents, and teachers with a more accurate representation of student learning is the goal of the new policy. Adopting a policy that requires all classrooms in the district to use standards-based grading provides a grading and reporting system that will be concentrated on individual learning. Honor roll, class rank, and bell curves will be eliminated with the adoption of the new policy. Grades in the traditional grading system do not always accurately represent what a student knows, and the system does not encourage continual growth (Guskey, 2009; Dueck, 2014). Learning takes place through communication and feedback; both features that are strong in a standards-based system (Marzano, 2000; Wininger, 2005; O'Connor, 2007; Dirksen, 2011; Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012). Homework is reported separately from the achievement grades in a standards-based system. Students who live in poverty do not have the same supports or resources as other students (Vatterott 2009; Carr, 2013; Dueck, 2014). The proposed grading system will help lift that barrier since

homework should be a tool to support learning, as opposed to a major part of a student's grade. Evaluating students' knowledge in the classroom is an effective way to understand what a child has learned. The focus of standards-based grading is to obtain a clear picture of what each student knows, using that information to move forward to extend learning.

Objectives

Assessments Written as Learning Goals to Monitor Learning

Classroom-based assessments are an integral part of grading and reporting in a standards-based grading system. By separating out homework and compliance, a student's entire grade will derive from assessments that are completed in class, reflecting a clearer picture of the student's knowledge level. These assessments generally are either summative, formative, or performance-based (Brookhart, 2011; Vatterott, 2015). A summative assessment is a test given at the end of a unit; it is a "summary of learning" from the unit that is currently being studied (Vatterott, 2015). Although formative assessments are either not graded or count for very little toward a final grade, they can be used for certain students to prove mastery. A formative assessment is given in class while students are still learning the topic being assessed. Most formative assessments are designed by the teacher to acquire an understanding of what the class knows in order to guide further instruction (Wininger, 2005; Wormeli, 2006; Dirksen, 2011). Performance-based assessments represent another way to assess students. These are usually in-class projects or assignments that test what a student knows about the learning. These assessments will be the exclusive measurement of student knowledge. The traditional system used homework as a portion of the final grade. Homework has several fidelity challenges; a teacher cannot be certain that the work was completed by the student, and

not with the assistance of a friend or parent or by using the internet. This gives some students the opportunity to inflate their grades by scoring well on work that might not represent their actual knowledge level.

Learning Standards Lead the Assessment Writing Process

Learning standards are used as a guide for curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a standards-based grading system. The new policy requires schools to evaluate students based on their comprehension of learning standards. The goal for students is to be able to display proficiency on each of the learning standards at their grade level. The traditional grading system used standards, but it did not explicitly link instruction and assessment to each individual learning standard. Learning standards are an integral part of the learning process, and students and parents will both benefit by knowing each required standard. The traditional grading system did not clearly communicate learning standards to students; that information was understood mostly by teachers. Students have a greater chance of showing proficiency on the learning standards when they clearly understand the objective they are attempting to meet (Dueck, 2014; Vatterott, 2015).

Common Assessments and Collaboration Guide Instruction

Using common assessments provides teachers with one more opportunity to expand the strength of their instruction. Common assessments encourage teachers to collaborate using their assessment data to learn more about what is working in their classroom. Collaboration is more useful when teachers communicate about the same standards and assessment questions (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Heflebower et al., 2014). The traditional system required teachers to hypothesize the reasons for a student's failing

a class. Teachers would have to investigate and decide whether it was the homework, tests, classwork, participation, or many other things. In a standards-based system, it is clear that students do not understand the curriculum if they are not meeting the standard. Identifying successes and challenges using data is more powerful working in teams.

Meeting the Needs of Stakeholders

The world of education has several groups of stakeholders, all of whose needs must be met. Educating the youth of a country is a powerful part of our society. Parents, community members, board members, and educators all want the best for students. Everyone has different needs; parent's needs are different from those of a teacher. Standards-based grading meets the needs of all the groups listed, but especially the students.

Students

Students need teachers to help them develop academically, socially, and as citizens of the world. Standards-based grading increases feedback that is targeted toward learning standards (Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2007; Heflebower et al., 2014). In addition, the new grading system is an ongoing process that allows students to fail and relearn. An embedded retake policy grants students an opportunity to prove mastery after the initial assessment. Students' motivational needs are met in the new system. They will not feel a sense of hopelessness after failing one or two assignments, specifically if they receive a zero after not turning in an assignment. A new system based solely on learning will foster a different motivation. Increasing students' motivation will benefit teachers in the long run.

Teachers

Teachers desire what is best for their students. The needs of teachers will be fulfilled when the needs of students are met. Professionally, teachers want to do everything they can to maximize the potential of their students. Standards-based grading allows both teachers and students to continue to learn while knowing that there is an opportunity to retake assessments when learning has not been demonstrated. Standards-based grading, along with the implementation of common assessments, gives teachers the chance to make professional decisions adjusting curriculum and instruction.

Parents

Parents have their needs met in a standards-based system when their children are learning. Parents want to be involved and to understand what their children are doing in school. The new grading system in MCCSD #93 will provide parents with significantly more information than did the traditional grading system. A standards-based report card shows parents a multitude of standards that their child has or has not mastered (Guskey, 2004; Guskey, 2009). Parents can be much more involved when they are provided detailed support for their child in this new system.

Addressing Community Values

When we say we value education, we usually mean that we want the children in our community to be as well educated as possible. Standards-based grading will be a solid foundation to educate the children of the community. It can be the guiding force to strengthen learning by giving ongoing opportunities to learn. Becoming a life-long

learner in the global society is a goal that most parents, teachers, and community members agree upon. Standards-based grading will help students meet this expectation.

SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT

Nearly every situation involving change encompasses both pros and cons. When change involves the lives of children and the education system of a community, the pros and cons become even more important. Changing a district-wide grading policy to standards-based grading is no different. The purpose of this section is to analyze the learning benefits and challenges that come with instituting standards-based grading. Each one is discussed in detail. The pros far outweigh the cons.

Argument

We have discussed several of the pros in previous sections, but it is still necessary to understand in detail the role of each one. A district-wide grading policy that uses standards-based grading furnishes better feedback by providing parents with information and report cards that offer more than a letter grade. Standards-based grading shows the progress of several standards for each student. Students are naturally encouraged to use a growth mindset in the new system. The attainment of knowledge is reported throughout the year, which encourages students to master each standard at any point. The final pro centers on the adult learning and the benefit that teachers will experience with standards-based grading. Specific data that shows the progress of each student in the classroom improves instruction over time. That data will have a great effect on individual teachers and the overall learning environment in each school.

Feedback is Specific to Student Knowledge of Standards

Feedback is a major component of the learning process. Students cannot learn from a mistake unless they are told directly what they did wrong. Giving a student only a

checkmark on their assignment does not inform them how or why the answer is wrong. When the assessment is linked directly to a learning standard and the student knows what the standard means, the feedback is more powerful to support learning (Dueck, 2014; Vatterott, 2015). Standards-based grading allows students to relearn the material once the assessment is done. The ultimate goal in education should be to enhance the learning of students at all costs. Standards-based grading uses feedback to enrich learning regardless of the period of the school-year in which that learning takes place. Students continually strive to learn.

Standards-Based Grading Encourages a Growth Mindset

The growth mindset is extremely powerful in a school setting. Creating an atmosphere where students have the motivation to grow as learners is essential. The growth mindset is one where a person continually thrives to learn (Dweck, 2006). In a traditional grading system, it is much easier to fall into the fixed mindset which is where students believe their talents and abilities are fixed skills (Dweck, 2006). The traditional grading system makes it difficult for students who cannot learn something as quickly according to the time expectation of the curriculum. The traditional system administers an assessment at a specific time of the year, gives a student a score on that assessment, and does not allow the student an opportunity to prove their ability to learn that material at a later date. Standards-based grading affords the students the opportunity to have their learning reported at a later date if they learn the information after the assessment is given.

Instruction Improves with Data Specific to Learning Standards

There is a clear improvement of teaching and learning using standards-based grading compared to the traditional grading system. Teaching improves with the creation and use of common assessments; the ability to collaborate in teams using common assessments; and the opportunity for teachers to inspire their students to continually strive to learn (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Heflebower et al., 2014). Common assessments are detailed and specific to learning standards with the new grading policy. The assessments are written to directly match the learning standards that the district has deemed essential for students to learn. Every teacher in the subject area department or grade level is familiar with the assessments and will have a better ability to identify why a student is struggling. In a traditional system, homework, in-class work, participation grades, and many other grading traits make it difficult for teachers to communicate with each other about why a student may be struggling. Common summative assessments that make up a student's grade create a common language and understanding that allows an entire school to support student learning.

Counter-argument

Standards-based grading as a district-wide grading policy is a major change to how grading is accomplished. There is currently no long-term research proving the efficacy of standards-based grading for student learning. Any change may bring fear to those people who are affected, especially parents. Districts have experienced issues with the implementation of standards-based grading in the Chicago area. The biggest roadblock to success in these schools has been parents who are not familiar with the new grading policy (Rado, 2016).

Parent Familiarity with the Traditional Grading System

Nearly every parent in the district attended a school that used the traditional grading system. The traditional letter-grade system is comfortable and easy to understand. An F means you are not doing your work; you do not understand the curriculum; or you may be not paying attention in class. The standards-based system does not deliver this same clarity. There are numerous standards for each subject and each standard has a score between 1- 4 (Marzano, 2000; Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Guskey, 2015). A parent is required to spend more time to understand each ranking for each standard. The traditional system of one letter per subject was easier to understand.

The standards-based system is new. Work must be done on the front end to educate parents about the principles of the new system. Creating a specific plan that is simple and has a direct focus on student learning can help the change process (Fullan, 2008). Parents can become angry and confused if they do not understand why major aspects of the traditional system, such as homework, compliance, or extra credit, are not being used in their child's grade. (Vatterott, 2015).

Changing to a New System Takes Time

Change will take three or four years to complete. People may become frustrated with the length of time required to fully complete change. Educational leaders in the district must clearly communicate their vision. People are more willing to accept and champion long-term change if they believe the final goal is attractive to students and their own professional well-being (Heath & Heath, 2010). Professional development for the

teachers and administrators on the basics of standards-based grading will be the focus in year one of the plan. Educating parents and community members will be the emphasis of years two and three. Implementation of the grading system will begin in year four (Heflebower et al., 2014). A report card will be rolled out for the first time, and each grade level will completely adopt full implementation of the grading system by year four.

Fear of Colleges Not Accepting Standards-Based Grades

Class rank and grade point average frequently stop the proposal of standards-based grading before it is implemented in high schools. MCCSD #93 is a unit school district, which is preK-12. The high school makes up 35 percent of the district enrollment. Changing the entire district grading policy to standards-based grading is challenged by the fact that the high school will lose class rank and GPA. GPA will be gone due to the absence of a letter grades in each subject. Subsequently, class rank cannot exist when students no longer have grade point averages. Some stakeholders may be concerned that their opportunity to get into a high-ranking college will be lessened due to standards-based grading. It can be anticipated that many of those with students in the top of the class will be the most disappointed by the loss of class rank and GPA. The desire to earn a high GPA has been proven to be problematic. Many students pursue a high GPA by doing extra credit, or taking easier classes to inflate their GPA, leaving behind the value of learning (Vatterott, 2015). Regardless, changing to standards-based grading will be a challenge as the district implements the new system, perhaps the most challenging issue.

Traditional Grading System Teaches Responsibility

Some parents, community members, and teachers strongly believe that behaviors such as punctuality and compliance should be part of a student's grade because they believe that grading these qualities teaches students responsibility. No research can disprove this belief, meaning that there will be a dissenting group that believes students are getting a free pass when they are not punished for not turning their work in on time. They may disagree that we are not directly rewarding students who complete their work on time.

Summary

The pros outweigh the cons in this situation. The pros are directly linked to improving student learning. The cons are more focused on individual beliefs. The pros are that standards-based grading improves teaching; it allows students to continually progress; and increases feedback that students receive from teachers. The cons are that parents don't like it as much; it might affect a student's college placement; and it might not teach responsibility by giving students a "free pass". A great school district will always place its students first. In the case of MCCSD #93, the teachers, the district administration, the building administration, and the school board always want to do what is best for students.

SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Implementing a district-wide policy change is not a minor task. A leader must have a vision for success, thinking of every possible scenario that may affect the new policy. Some visions for success cannot be carried out due to barriers that prevent them. Administrators and teachers will analyze each step of implementation required to make the new grading policy of standards-based grading a success. Implementation will require that teachers and administrators select priority standards and write a new grading system using standards; teachers will need to create proficiency scales and common assessments. While all of this work is taking place, professional development will be needed to assist teachers and administrators in making the transition to standards-based grading. Planning and preparing for the new system will require additional time and effort, but the task is worth it considering the long term benefits that both teachers and students will experience.

Using Standards to Create a New Grading System

Successfully implementing standards-based grading necessitates a change in the way schools assess and report student learning. Teachers use formative and summative assessments to track the progress of students in the current system. Therefore, assessment is a familiar topic to teachers and administrators. Standards-based grading relies on assessments in each school. This district-wide shift will take support, time, and attention to detail to make sure the assessments in MCCSD #93 fortify the standards-based grading framework.

Standards-based grading is a system that is learning-focused; the system reports what students know about learning standards in an individual subject. Each subject

generally has multiple standards that are reported (Brookhart, 2011). The score in a standards-based system communicates the student's knowledge of a specific standard.

The proposed policy change will have a significant impact on everyone from board members to students. As is often the case when change takes place in schools, teachers are the group that is essential to the success of the proposed change. The traditional grading system has existed for a long time. As a result of the longevity of the traditional grading system, a district-wide change challenges the beliefs and behaviors of many teachers. Many teachers and administrators will need to shift their paradigm to teach and assess from a traditional grading system to a standards-based framework to make the new policy effective. The new grading policy is a necessary change which requires sufficient planning.

Time Schedules

The implementation of standards-based grading will take three years of planning and preparation, with the full implementation in the classroom taking place during the fall of the fourth year. The recommended plan for MCCSD #93 is delineated in the following chart.

Figure 2: Schedule for Implementation of Standards-Based Grading

	Planning and preparation activities for standards-based grading
Year 1	Changing the Paradigm
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers and administrators present to the board of education - Consultant works with staff on benefits of standards-based grading - District-wide book study on standards-based grading - District-wide committee selects priority standards
Year 2	Creating the Foundation of Standards-Based Grading
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultant works with staff on proficiency scales and common assessments - Teachers write proficiency scales - Teachers write common assessments - District and building administrators lead initial parent meetings about benefits of standards-based grading
Year 3	Completing the Foundation before Rollout
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finish writing proficiency scales and common assessments - Consultant works with staff on formative assessment and retake policy - District-wide committee selects report card - Consultant leads parent meetings about benefits of standards-based grading
Year 4	Full Implementation

Year 1: Changing the Paradigm

The first year is crucial to the success of the program. Full implementation with the students will not take place until the fourth year, but the early work will develop the perception for many people as they begin to create their own beliefs about the new grading system. A failure by the administration to properly exhibit the overwhelming benefits of standards-based grading could create an environment where some people do not believe in standards-based grading. Thus, the understanding of success starts with the board of education. A team of administrators and teachers needs to present the benefits of standards-based grading to the board. Any new initiative needs to have the approval and

support of the board of education if long-term gains are to be realized. After presenting to the board early in the year, professional development should begin.

Shifting Teachers' Way of Thinking

Teachers' beliefs and practices typically span a wide spectrum on most educational topics. There are undoubtedly teachers in MCCSD #93 who are adamantly against standards-based grading, while other teachers there are presently using practices that come from standards-based grading. Because of this disparity, work must be done to build ownership and the understanding that teachers and administrators need to have in the new grading system. The two methods the district will utilize to provide professional development to the staff in the district are hiring a consultant and completing a district-wide book study.

Consultant hired to build standard-based grading capacity.

A consultant will be hired during institute day at the start of the school year. There are many consultants available at varying price points. Working with a consultant gives teachers an outside perspective from someone who has used standards-based grading and continues to study its benefits. The consultant will speak to teachers at least two more times throughout the first semester in order to reinforce the benefits of standards-based grading. The second professional development, a district-wide book study, will be taught within each school and be led by building administration.

District-wide book study will support consultant work.

All of the teachers and administrators will participate in a district-wide book study. A survey to see where everyone is at with beliefs and perceptions of standards-based grading will be conducted to determine selection of an appropriate title. Reading a

book together and having time to collaborate with colleagues is a way to form ownership and learn together as a group. Each school will schedule one hour a month to read and discuss the selected book. Some recommended titles for a school book study might include: Tom Guskey (2015), *On your mark: Challenging the conventions of grading and reporting*, Ken O'Connor (2007), *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades*, or Cathy Vatterott (2015), *Rethinking grading: Meaningful assessment for standards-based learning*. This is not an exhaustive list.

Selecting Standards to Use for Grading

Reporting on every standard for each subject will be challenging. The district will teach all required standards; however, not every standard will be assessed and reported on. In the four core subjects alone, there are too many standards to assess and report with consistency and detail. There are 32 standards in English Language Arts. Math has a total of five subject area domains, which contain a total of ten standards, with 28 substandards. The Next Generation Science Standards have four major subject areas that contain 16 standards for the grade level. The new state Social Studies standards adopted in 2016 list five major subject areas with 23 standards listed within those subject areas. If MCCSD #93 decided to assess and report on each one of those standards, it would have to assess and report 99 standards just in the four core subjects. That is an impossible task.

A district-wide committee will select the standards to be listed on each student's report card. These standards are known as priority standards (Heflebower et al., 2014). Each teacher will continue to teach all 16-32 standards required for the subject, but not all of them will be reported. The process of selecting district-wide priority standards should

happen in a timely manner. Once teachers know what they are assessing, the next step is to create proficiency scales.

Year 2: Creating the Foundation of Standards-based Grading

Each component of professional development is important, but year two includes two key aspects that have to be in place for standards-based grading to occur. Writing proficiency scales and common assessments will require time and collaboration for teachers. The district will be best served by hiring a consultant to assist staff in writing proficiency scales. The same consultant can spend time supporting teachers on writing common assessments. This process will take several meetings, to be completed during the first semester. Teachers will have the second semester of year two to complete this work.

Writing Proficiency Scales for Assessments

A proficiency scale is the documentation that will be used to display what students know about an individual standard. A proficiency scale describes the student's progress in relation to the standard they are learning. This is a key element of the implementation of standards-based grading. A district cannot move to standards-based grading without writing a form of a proficiency scale for each standard. Each scale should be written in grade or subject level teams. The scales serve the same purpose as a teachers writing classroom objectives for their students; it sets the goal for what mastery of the standard looks like. The portrait of success for a student at a certain grade level is clear. Standards-based grading and the use of proficiency scales make the learning process very transparent. Matching the proficiency scales to common assessments is essential for teachers to accurately assess the standards.

Writing and Aligning Common Assessments

Assessments in standards-based grading are written as goals for learning and can be broken down by an individual standard. Assessments must be common by grade level or subject area. For example, every second-grade class in the district will administer the same assessments through the year. At the secondary level, the assessments are common by subject level. Social studies teachers will write assessments to ensure that all junior American History tests are the same for all students. Using common assessments provides teachers with an opportunity to strengthen their instruction and encourage teachers to collaborate using their assessment data to learn more about what is working in their classroom. Collaboration is more useful when teachers communicate about the same standards and assessment questions (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Heflebower et al., 2014). Time and professional development will be needed to support teachers in writing common assessments across the district.

Communicating with Stakeholders

The end of year two is a time to communicate the change with all stakeholders, especially parents. The first contact with parents is to introduce the concept of standards-based grading and to build familiarity in the community. The district and building administration will lead a series of meetings during the second semester. An effective method that many districts use is morning meetings or “coffee with the principal” to discuss the new policy. The goal of these meetings is to notify parents early and communicate the benefits that students (and parents) will experience with standards-based grading.

Year 3: Completing the Foundation before Rollout

By the beginning of the third year, the foundation of the new grading system will be in place. The focus of year three is on completing the final details before the next fall. Time will be provided to teachers throughout the year to conclude writing proficiency scales and common assessments. Retakes and formative assessment will be the main topics for professional development. A consultant is recommended to educate teachers about using formative assessment to guide instruction in the classroom toward mastery as well as the benefits of allowing retakes. Retakes and the use of formative assessments are vital in standards-based grading. Although some teachers currently use retakes in their classes, many teachers will benefit from the guidance of a consultant in furthering their understanding of the benefits that retakes provide.

Allowing Assessment Retakes and Using Formative Assessments

A retake is when a student takes an assessment with the same learning objectives for a second time. Many teachers use some types of formative assessment, but using them specifically to guide each student toward mastery of a standard may take more time and attention to detail. Parents, students, and teachers all know the final goal when trying to master standards; there are no surprises. A classroom environment built on formative assessment is in which teachers and students are committed to growth. Similar to the previous professional development sessions, it is recommended that a consultant be brought in to lead the teachers on formative assessment. The same consultant would be asked to direct the staff in learning about retakes in classrooms. Pushing students to continually learn is a key part of the standards-based framework. The continuation of

learning means that a student may not display mastery of a standard on an assessment until well after the initial assessment is given.

Switching to a standards-based grading system takes time and effort. Professional development from experts is needed as the teachers and administrators take on the arduous task of changing the grading system to meet the new district policy, but more importantly to best support student learning.

District-wide Committee Selects Report Card

The final step is the selection of a report card. A new report card will be district-wide, serving approximately 2,800 students. A district-wide committee of volunteers representing administrators, teachers, and parents will choose the report card. The committee will research report cards in use in other districts. Having all the priority standards selected makes the report card selection easier. Every standard selected by the district for assessment is listed on the report card. With each of these tasks completed, full implementation will take place at all grade levels.

Consultant Leads District-wide Parent Meetings

One of the final steps before full implementation is to have a consultant conduct informational sessions for parents and community members the spring before full implementation. Meeting with district and building-level administrators can give parents an idea about the new grading system, but an expert can best help parents understand the benefits of standards-based grading. It would benefit the district to schedule three meetings of one or two hours in a convenient location. The consultant will give short presentations about why standards-based grading is the best grading system to support

student learning. More importantly, the consultant can answer questions, providing expertise and experience to help everyone feel more comfortable with the change.

Year 4: Full Implementation

Each grade level across the district will be using standards-based grading to assess and report student learning at the beginning of year four. A district-wide committee should meet monthly to discuss the progress of the new grading system. The committee can celebrate successes while making recommendations for improvements to the new system.

Program Budgets

The new grading initiative will require extra spending. The majority of the expenditures will be for professional development and the services of a consultant. To maintain consistency, the same consultant should be hired for the entire process. Other areas of expenditures will be the purchase of books for the book study, paying for substitute teachers so that teachers have time to write proficiency scales and common assessments, and professional development. The figure below shows the estimates of the three years of costs to implement standards-based grading.

Figure 3: Estimated Costs to Implement Standards-Based Grading

Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$25,000 – three all-day sessions of consultant work - \$5,000 – books for district-wide book study
Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$30,000 – three-day consultation - \$69,120 – substitute teachers to allow meeting time for teachers during the day (6 half days per teacher)
Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$23,040 – substitute teacher pay to allow meeting time for teachers during the day (2 half days per teacher) - \$32,000 – three all-day sessions on consultant work
Total for 3 years	- \$184,160 (\$61,386.66 per year)

Teachers need time to work together to write proficiency scales and common assessments. It is recommended that in year two each teacher work with their grade or subject-level team for a total of six half days. This work will be done during year two of the implementation process. The six half days can be intermixed with one-hour late starts that happen every week. Teachers will get a chance to meet for two half days in the final year before the new grading system is fully implemented. This expense is much greater since it involves paying substitute teachers during the year to teach classes for teachers while they are working on writing proficiency scales and common assessments.

The final expense comes from the hiring of consultants to provide professional development for staff on the benefits of standards-based grading, writing proficiency scales, common assessments, retakes, and using formative assessment to instruct. Hiring

a consultant each year for three years will constitute a substantial expense, but it will be worthwhile support to successfully implement standards-based grading.

SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

With the adoption of standards-based grading as a new grading policy in MCCSD #93, the next logical step is to consider the method of progress monitoring as the new system is put into place. Section six is divided into three major sections: District Office Responsibilities, Principals' Responsibilities, and Teachers' Responsibilities. The district office and the Superintendent will play a key role in leading the process of change. The Superintendent's Office will communicate the vision of standards-based grading to all stakeholders. The principals will be relied upon to support teachers as the new policy is implemented. Principals will have many of the same responsibilities that the superintendent has, but on a building level. They will carry out and share the vision of the new policy in their respective schools. Teachers will administer and using standards-based grading at a classroom level. Teachers will record grades using the system and communicate with parents, reporting on individual standards. All three groups are accountable for carrying out some aspect of the new grading policy. The responsibility is important for all three groups and standards-based grading will only be effective when they fulfill their roles.

District Office Responsibilities

The administrators that make up the District Office are the leaders that create the vision of success for the entire district. In the case of this policy change, it is leading the change to a standards-based grading system. An effective superintendent leads by example and can inspire people in the district by positively communicating the vision to reinforce the new grading system. In addition to providing leadership, the District Office

will select the consultant and lead the district implementation committee work. These are crucial tasks for standards-based grading to be effectively implemented.

Hire Consultant to work with Teachers to Shift Paradigm

Many teachers have been grading the same way for decades. Grading is a significant part of teachers' lives. Changing to a standards-based system alters a long-standing system of doing multiple homework assignments, in class assignments, quizzes and tests that all get averaged into one single score. Some teachers are using standards-based principles, but many are not. This change will require a paradigm shift for many teachers in the district. Expert consultation is key to ensuring that all staff firmly grasp the foundations of standards-based grading. District office administration will need to select a consultant who can communicate the district's vision vis-à-vis standards-based grading. Shifting the way teachers think about grading is a key first step.

Lead the District Implementation Committee's Monthly Meetings

District Office administrators will lead the district implementation committee, a group that will meet monthly throughout the year to discuss standards-based grading. Although the Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent will lead the committee, there will be representation from teachers, building principals, and parents from each of the five schools. Parental input is essential for the committee, because the parents' perspective may differ from staff's. The district-wide committee will listen and discuss all issues related to implementation. The committee will continue to meet during the first three years of the transition to standards-based grading.

Implementation committee creates district-wide survey.

The implementation committee will construct a survey for all stakeholders. Major aspects of implementation will be questioned on the survey, such as day to day grading, report cards, communication of student learning to students and parents, and perceptions of how effective the new system is with student learning. Data from the survey will identify what went well in year one and areas for improvement during the following school year. The committee may find some features of the system need to be changed for the upcoming year, or they may find out that additional professional development could be beneficial.

Principals' Responsibilities

Principals will lead the change efforts in each school. They will communicate and carry out the vision of standards-based grading, and they will also lead the committee within their own schools. In addition, they will be the liaison between the teachers and district office.

Supporting Teachers with Assessments and Proficiency Scales

A standards-based system relies on common assessments and proficiency scales. Students show proficiency of learning standards on assessments that are common across a grade level or a subject area. Principals must support teachers to successfully write and monitor both of these aspects of standard-based grading. Both tasks are difficult and take time, even with the support of a consultant as mentioned in section 5, but teachers will be supported in this task by their principals.

Analyze Standardized Test Scores as Learning Outcomes

Assessing the implementation of standards-based grading in District #93 will rely primarily on qualitative data and perceptions; however, standardized test scores can be quantified. The current standardized test that districts are judged by is the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment and Readiness for College and Careers) test. PARCC is an annual standardized test administered every spring to grades 3-8. Analyzing PARCC scores over at least a two year period will give principals an idea of the effectiveness of standards-based grading. The PARCC exam is written based on Common Core standards, meaning it can be hypothesized that standards-based grading should increase standardized-test scores.

Leading Quarterly Meetings in their Building

Quarterly meetings will be scheduled between principals and teachers in each of the 5 schools for the purpose of offering support and assistance to teachers. These meetings will provide a venue for teachers to ask questions, and to collaboratively problem-solve issues as they arise during the early phases of implementation. District administration will regularly collaborate with the building leaders to see how the new policy is being applied in the schools. The focus of the early meetings in the fall will be on what resources are needed that the district office can supply to principals and teachers. The quarterly meetings are an opportunity for school leaders and teachers to communicate in a timely manner.

Teachers' Responsibilities

The ground-level work of writing rubrics, proficiency scales, and common assessments will be done by the teachers. Communication of student knowledge to parents is another role that teachers hold in a standard-based system. Professional development and ongoing support will be provided to teachers, but it is they who are responsible for carrying out the essential tasks of designing and implementing this new system.

Grade level/Subject area Groups meet to Monitor Assessments

During the early years of implementation, it is likely that teachers will experience struggles with common assessments. There will inevitably be questions that are poorly written, or standards that are not being taught thoroughly enough for students to demonstrate learning. It is imperative that teachers collaborate, discover those areas that are not working, and make changes to support student learning. The implementation of standards-based grading will be less effective if the assessments and scales used to score students are not carefully constructed and routinely revised as needed.

Analyze Common Assessment Data

The standards that the district will be using to report student learning are aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Classroom assessment artifacts will be broken down by teachers to monitor how well students are learning at a classroom level. Teachers will gain a clear understanding of the effectiveness of their curriculum and instruction by analyzing their common assessments. If students score poorly, that will mean that they are not learning and that changes will need to be made. The goal of the

new grading system is to increase student learning. Student performance on the district-wide common assessments will be the best indicator of how well students are learning.

Adopting standards-based grading as a district-wide grading policy is an appropriate path. It is a highly effective grading and reporting system available to support individual student learning. However, even the most effective program will struggle if it is not implemented well. Progress monitoring and assessing the policy are essential pieces. Short and long term success will be realized as student learning increases to even greater levels. The table below outlines the responsibilities of each stakeholder group in schools.

Figure 4: Assessment Responsibilities and Timeline.

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	ASSESSMENT RESPONSIBILITIES	PRODUCT	IMPLEMENTATION TIME
District office	Hire Consultant	Consultant works with district staff	Two years prior to implementation.
	Lead implementation committee	Minutes of monthly meeting	Years 1 – 3
Principals'	Support teachers to evaluate common assessment and proficiency scales	Common assessments and proficiency scales	Begins year 1, continues yearly
	Analyze standardized test scores	Decisions about the standards-based grading effect on test scores	Summer/Fall of years 2 and 3
	Lead quarterly meeting	Progress report for District office	End of each quarter during year 1 of implementation
Teachers'	Monitor assessments and grading components in grade level or subject area group	Changes to assessments and proficiency scales	Year 1
	Analyze common assessment data	Grade level/subject area data reports	Bi-weekly/monthly

SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

Standards-Based Grading is an Appropriate Policy

Improving student achievement is at the center of this proposed policy change. Standards-based grading is an effective system to present stakeholders with the information they need to increase student learning (Marzano, 2000; Wininger, 2005; O'Connor, 2007; Dirksen, 2011; Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012). The traditional grading system has flaws (DiSibio, 1971; Marzano, 2000; Vatterott, 2015). Many times, grades do not reflect actual student learning in the traditional system. Grades may be inflated by extra credit, compliance, or behavior, as opposed to students actually learning and displaying their knowledge of the academic curriculum (Vatterott, 2015). Contrarily, some students can demonstrate comprehension of the curriculum, but will have a failing grade due to not turning in homework assignments or misbehaving in class. The failing grade is more a result of lacking compliance and behavior than it is a deficiency in understanding academics. This becomes an issue when students and parents are seeing grades that do not truly reflect the student's understanding. Standards-based grading offers a more objective look at what a student knows.

When a standards-based system is implemented, parents and students will have more information about learning than they have ever had. Assessment results provide teachers the information they need to report feedback for each standard. This new grading policy encourages students to continue the learning process throughout the year. (Marzano, 2010; Heflebower et al., 2014; Vatterott, 2015). "One and done" tests are not a part of standards-based grading. Although a student may have an overall high grade in a class in the traditional setting, the student could be struggling with one area of the class.

More specific feedback in the standards-based grading system specifies the areas of weakness for students and their families. This is an improvement over the traditional system where a student receives just one letter grade.

It is safe to predict that there will be resistance to changing the grading policy. Change is difficult in any situation, and especially when it deviates from a system that every parent, student, and teacher used growing up. Moving to a standards-based system will end letter grades. Although this change may be met with some resistance, communicating the benefits with stakeholders frequently and honestly can ease the process of change and help everyone realize that standards-based grading is a grading policy that will help improve student learning in the long run.

What and Whose Values are at the Center of Standards-Based Grading

Improved student learning is the value that drives the new grading policy. Advocating for standards-based grading is a decision that is based on doing what is best for students. A school system benefits by critically evaluating what they are doing and making improvements when appropriate. Standards-based grading provides a framework that encourages support of student learning for all stakeholders. Student motivation increases as students have a clear understanding of the learning goals they are trying to meet. Students' progress is measured only against themselves and the priority standards that the district selects for students to learn. This new transparency of learning goals is not exclusive to students only since parents will also be included. Standards-based grading reinforces the value of student learning at a much higher level than the traditional system.

In the traditional grading system, it is challenging for parents to identify the areas where their student is struggling. Parents may see a grade that does not meet their expectations, and their only method to support their student may be to say, “Work harder” or “Study harder”. In a standards-based system, there is increased information about what a student knows in each subject, allowing parents to maximize the guidance they are able to provide. Behavior and work ethic can still be reported on a standards-based report card, but separate from the academic portion of the grade (Brookhart, 2011). Areas of concern can be addressed more directly, as opposed to just getting a single grade and having to guess what caused the grade.

Teachers generally have a clear idea of why a student is struggling; however, it is sometimes difficult to articulate which specific standards are not being met. Writing common assessments requires time and effort on the part of teachers, but the increase of data will strengthen teachers’ instruction. Student deficiencies can be identified and supported much more efficiently in the new grading system.

Implementation is Consistent with the District Mission and Vision

The vision for success with the new grading policy of standards-based grading is that students, parents, and teachers will receive a more accurate representation of what a student knows in each subject area. This is a result of specific feedback for each student delivered through a report card that lists multiple learning standards for each subject (Marzano, 2000; O’Connor, 2007; Heflebower et al., 2014). This vision for success will guide the process of advocating for change and will drive the implementation process. It cannot be realized without the creation of key foundation pieces that must be in place for the new system to be fully implemented: selection of priority standards, writing of

proficiency scales, writing of common assessments, and selection of standards-based report card. Teachers must be trained and supported on each one of the topics previously listed.

The process cannot begin until a district committee selects the standards that the district will teach and report. These standards are known as the priority standards (Heflebower et al., 2014). Once the standards have been selected, teachers will be able to begin the arduous work of writing proficiency scales for each standard and matching common assessments with those proficiency scales. This process will take 2-3 years to complete.

This detailed implementation plan is consistent with the vision of supporting student learning at a higher level. Doing what is best for students is the framework that guides the implementation process every step along the way. The goal is to push student achievement to the highest level it can be. The new grading policy will fulfill that goal.

Conclusion

Implementing standards-based grading district-wide is a sound decision for MCCSD #93. It is a learner-centered grading system that is focused on student achievement. Motivation will increase as students are empowered with information about their learning. Parents and teachers will receive specific feedback and data allowing for better support. Overall, the short and long term benefits of changing to standards-based grading will outweigh any doubts or fears about shifting from the traditional system.

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