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A School District's Change To Standards-Based Grading: A Conduit To Student Learning

Perry A. Finch

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A SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CHANGE TO STANDARDS-BASED GRADING: A
CONDUIT TO STUDENT LEARNING

Perry A. Finch

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement of
Doctor of Education
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

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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

Nothing can be more important in a student's learning process than feedback. This study looks at what is needed to effectively guide an elementary school district from a traditional letter grade system to a standards-based grading system. Survey data were collected from 91 teachers across the district in order to measure their understanding of standards-based grading. A standards-based grading pilot was conducted with six teachers from the elementary and middle school level. Four of these six teachers participated in a group interview to share perceptions of this pilot. Survey data were collected from the 54 students involved in the pilot. Findings suggest the standard-based curriculum and assessments created prior to the study by teachers provided valuable background knowledge for the change to standards-based grading. Both teachers and students found that feedback based on standards was valuable to all stakeholders. However the use of letter grades is a tradition deeply ingrained in our society: promoting an effective change in student grading requires time, information, and communication to promote an effective transformation in grading practice.

PREFACE

As I finish this change plan to help guide my district away from traditional grading practices to a more accurate and meaningful standards-based method of reporting student performance, I feel fortunate that the work in this plan will actually be put into action. District 32 (pseudonyms are used in this document) stands on the brink of implementing standards-based grading with the new system set to begin next school year. The work in my previous research document involved an evaluation of our district's student growth assessments. Designed by our teachers, these common assessments are part of our teacher evaluation metrics and are designed by our teachers and tightly aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). One of the major findings of my research revealed District 32 teachers consistently stated a desire to report student understandings not with a letter grade but based on the CCSS.

One of the things that I learned as I completed this current research involves effective ways to implement change in a system. By utilizing the Change Leadership Group's protocols known as the 4 Cs, I learned the value in recognizing where you are before beginning the change process. It seems so simple yet is often overlooked when organizations attempt change. To go where you want to go, you have to know where you are. By working with the Change Leadership Group's 4 Cs framework, I was able to analyze where my district stood in its readiness to make the change to standards-based grading. In addition, the 4 Cs forced me to envision what a successful shift to standards-based grading might look like (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, & Rasmussen, 2006).

Through a review of relevant literature on the topic of standards-based grading, I learned that there is mounting evidence that suggests traditional grading practices may negatively impact learning for some students. Through my research, I have learned that providing students with feedback based on learning standards creates opportunities for them to view learning as an ongoing process that doesn't end after an assessment. A disaggregated format for reporting student progress provides a greater opportunity for students to receive feedback that affirms their proficiencies and thus increases motivation for learning. Similarly my research suggests that providing students with feedback based on standards can increase students' accountability with their learning, a change that may come from the increase in motivation that standards-based grading provides.

A final take away from my research involves the common misconception that breaking from traditional letter grades is enabling students and not adequately preparing them for the "real world." This theory was proven to not necessarily be the case. Teachers in this study expressed that evaluating students through the use of standards and progressive assessment practices espoused in Schimmer (2016), which involve the use of only academic data and not behavioral data (e. g., timeliness of mastery, timeliness of work completion, reassessment options), actually prepared them *more* for the "real world." The shift from traditional grades to feedback based on standards created an ongoing learning environment that encouraged students and increased confidence, which elevated students' perseverance with their learning. In the end, some students adopted a growth mindset that could potentially increase their learning and better prepare them for the future.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

As the landscape of modern education evolves through changes such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math), and student growth components in teacher evaluation such as PERA (Performance Evaluation Review Act of Illinois), a fundamental challenge emerges regarding how to most effectively assess students' progress. Informed educators and policy-makers may often take differing approaches to this challenge. Regardless of these differences, the variations in school reform initiatives center on one fundamental purpose: the education of our youth. A commonly accepted purpose of school is to help students gain understanding of strategies and increase performance with pertinent skills in order to create independent thinkers who are prepared to solve the problems that await them in the future. This change plan focuses on standards-based grading because this progressive method of reporting student understanding may increase student learning and work toward that purpose.

All stakeholders in an educational organization need an accurate and efficient reporting method with respect to students' accomplishments and specific needs. Students need specific feedback in order to alter their personal plans for learning. Teachers need to organize this feedback in a fashion that maximizes flexibility in instruction that allows their teaching to best meet the individual needs of students. Reporting students' successes and failures in a disaggregated fashion is far more valuable than the traditional single letter grade often used by schools. According to O'Connor (2009), "The traditional practice of only recording an overall score provides very little information of value and

should be discontinued... The valuable information is in the profile—the details of achievement on each learning goal—not the overall score” (p. 53).

Stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers) who receive specific feedback gain a deeper understanding of students’ achievements and needs. The most detailed and informative means for communicating student understanding is a reporting process based on learning standards. Once schools have a sound implementation of the CCSS, these standards can best inform all stakeholders of students’ academic progress within that framework. Assessing student work against clearly delineated standards, *standards-based grading*, provides a systematic means of maintaining students’ focus on the purpose of learning instead of worrying about point gathering in the classroom. Guskey (2009) stated, “Standards-based grading provides a more comprehensive picture of students’ academic progress by identifying specific areas of strength, as well as areas where additional work may be needed” (p. 7).

Rationale

I have selected this topic for a change leadership plan because I believe that the primary purpose of school is to ignite a natural curiosity for learning in students. Too often school becomes a game of acquisition not of knowledge but of points, scores, or grades. As students become increasingly obsessed with grade-point averages, they drift further away from the ultimate goal of education: instilling a desire to learn. Sackstein (2015) stated, “Because of the culture of grades that has emerged, we have lost sight of what is important in school: the learning” (p. 21). I believe that standards-based reporting of students’ academic and behavioral progress is necessary to maintain the focus of school on learning. I have been fortunate enough to attend numerous conferences on

student assessment where I have heard such educational researchers as Rick Stiggins, Ken O'Connor, Jim Popham, and Tom Guskey discuss the value of increased knowledge of assessment known as *classroom assessment literacy* as it pertains to the teaching profession. Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, and Arter, (2012) clarify "*classroom assessment literacy* as the knowledge and skills needed to do two things: (1) gather *accurate* information about student achievement, and (2) use the assessment process and its results *effectively* to improve achievement" (p. 2). As a principal of a middle school, I agree with these assessment experts that it is through more accurate and meaningful assessment practices that greater student understanding occurs. Even prior to the onset of the CCSS, standards-driven education has become the accepted approach to instruction. Marzano and Alexandria (2006) professed:

Obviously, from the perspective of standards-based education, isolated overall letter grades (or overall percentage scores or even average rubric scores) are extremely deficient because they cannot provide the level of detailed feedback necessary to enhance student learning. (p. 125)

As my school and district have worked to create curriculum based upon the CCSS, the teachers have greatly enhanced their understanding of standards that were new just four years prior. In addition to the shared curriculum they have written, District 32 teachers also write common assessments based on the CCSS. As a result of this collaborative process, teachers now use common standards-based rubrics to score their standards-based common assessments. Although District 32 teachers' assessment literacy grew from these experiences, the use of standards-based rubrics has resulted in a natural

struggle. Teachers report difficulty transcribing the standards-based rubric score into a traditional letter grade format.

In my previous research evaluating our student growth assessment program used for teacher evaluation, District 32 teachers shared that students had begun to change how they spoke about their learning. Teachers discussed that students expressed their strengths and areas of growth in a much more meaningful way when learning was based clearly on standards (Finch, 2016). Some teachers shared that students had stopped asking, “How much is this worth?” This is what I am interested in and wish to pursue. Can using standards to assess students change their perceptions about learning itself?

Goals

Our traditional method of data gathering and reporting of student understandings is limited and does not provide a full range of student successes and deficits. Because this reporting system is inadequate, students may view school through the lens of gathering points and not through the lens of learning. The primary goal of this change plan is to establish the necessary scaffolds to increase students’ perceptions of school as a means for learning and personal growth. The implementation of standards-based grading can assist in increasing stakeholders’ understanding of students’ academic success, which in turn may increase students’ perceptions regarding the purpose of school.

Currently teachers report student success in a traditional A through F format in District 32. This limited format of reporting student understandings does not address the different nuances that make up such an aggregate score. A disaggregated score broken down by standards would provide a more detailed report of student understandings and in turn could increase student learning. Additionally, reporting student progress in an

expanded format such as by standards introduces the option to report student behaviors in a more individualized fashion as well.

The stakeholders who will benefit from this change include students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community including the high school into which District 32 feeds. Stakeholders will need to be educated regarding how to use this disaggregated grading based on standards to increase student learning. Increasing stakeholders' knowledge of student understanding fulfills the ultimate goal of this change plan: increased student learning.

Through surveys of students and teachers regarding the value of disaggregated assessment data based on standards, I hope to gain insight to the value of such a practice. Beyond these surveys, an interview will be conducted with teachers to gain further qualitative data to support this need for change.

Demographics

This change plan will be implemented in Broadview School District 32, which currently consists of 2,196 students who are taught by 159 teachers spanning three schools, Greenview Elementary School, Williams Elementary School, and Prairie Middle School. The student population of this district has numerous demographic groupings. Sixty-four percent of the student population qualifies as coming from a family of low-income, 66% are of Hispanic heritage, 14% are English learners, and 13% are special education students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Fifty-six percent of students met or exceeded state standards on the 2014 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) compared to the state average of 59%. The previous year, 57% of all District 32 students

met or exceeded state achievement standards with the state average remaining consistent at 59%.

SECTION TWO: ASSESSING THE 4 Cs

Introduction

In order to effectively enact change, it is important to consider all of the elements in a system that will be changing. The work of Tony Wagner and the Change Leadership Group necessitates the dissection of a system into “the 4 Cs”: context, culture, conditions, and competencies (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, & Rasmussen, 2006, pp. 99-104). According to Wagner et al., “What is needed is an analytic framework for understanding the interrelated parts or elements of the change process in schools and districts” (p. 98). To begin an analysis of District 32’s 4 Cs, it is informative to define where the district currently stands with these different components. It is necessary to detail the district’s “as is” perspective to detail where it stands with these different components.

Context

In Wagner et al.’s (2006) depiction of the 4 Cs, context involves the social, historical, and economic parameters in which a system operates. Context also refers to the skill demands that students must possess in order to be successful (p. 104). Currently in District 32, students are provided grades using the traditional practice of assigning one letter grade per subject from kindergarten through eighth grade. The context surrounding the district’s systemic change to reporting student successes based on standards is heavily influenced by student assessment performance in recent years. Additionally, the context in which the district exists is largely influenced by the previous work of its teachers over the past four years. A concentrated effort to increase differentiated instruction in our practice, the development of curricula and assessments based on the CCSS, and teachers

collaborating to create their own student-growth assessments (SGAs) as part of teacher evaluation all play a part in our context as the district prepares for this change.

A major factor of the context under which District 32 has operated over the past decade is overshadowed by the measurement of adequate yearly progress (AYP) of students on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT). Though replaced by the PARCC assessment (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) in 2015, ISAT has been the high stakes test through which the state of Illinois has met the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001. When NCLB mandated the success levels for all students throughout the United States, regardless of race, level of language acquisition, or degree of cognitive or emotional disability be measured and used to evaluate schools (United States Department of Education, 2003), a challenging circumstance was born in District 32. Much of our student demographics produce the potential for at-risk learning conditions for District 32 students. With 64% of the student population low-income, 66% Hispanic, 14% English learners, and 13% special education students, the district faces potential learning challenges. These conditions may have contributed to the struggles students have experienced over the past 10 years on the ISAT. An additional hurdle was introduced in the spring of 2013 when the ISAT cut scores were adjusted to increase the expectation of elevated rigor on the tests. Questions began to be adapted to reflect the more demanding CCSS and the cut scores for meets and exceeds levels were greatly raised. These two changes resulted in lower student test scores and a lower degree of students demonstrating mastery of the ISAT (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013b).

Table 1

District 32 and Illinois average composite ISAT scores

Year	District 32 meets/exceeds standards	State average meets/exceeds standards
2009	80	83
2010	81	85
2011	87	82
2012	85	82
2013	57	59
2014	56	59

Table 2

District 32 student subgroup ISAT reading scores

Demographic group	% students	Meets/ Exceeds	Achievement gap 2012	Achievement gap 2013	Achievement gap 2014
Hispanic	66.1	45	11	18	22
White	24.1	67	N/A	N/A	N/A
Asian	3.6	78	N/A	N/A	N/A
Black	3.4	26	30	40	41
Two or more	2.9	46	N/A	N/A	N/A
IEP	13.3	8	65	49	48
LEP	34.9	9	45	49	53
Low income	64.3	51	12	20	22

Table 3

District 32 student subgroup ISAT math scores

Demographic group	% students	Meets/ Exceeds	Achievement gap 2012	Achievement gap 2013	Achievement gap 2014
Hispanic	66.1	53	7	19	20
White	24.1	73	N/A	N/A	N/A
Asian	3.6	86	N/A	N/A	N/A
Black	3.4	34	22	45	39
Two or more	2.9	49	N/A	N/A	N/A
IEP	13.3	14	52	49	50
LEP	34.9	18	26	49	51
Low income	64.3	51	5	23	20

In the summer of 2010, the new assistant superintendent for learning in District 32 assigned a task force of teachers representing grades three through eight to come together to begin working with the English Language Arts (ELA) CCSS. This work entailed comparing the old, unwieldy standards—the Illinois Assessment Framework (IAF)—to these new more rigorous standards. The IAF that guided ELA instruction, a cumbersome load of standards laden with specific content as well as skills was adopted in 1997 and remained consistent (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois State Board of Education, 2014a). Though the two sets of standards differ in many ways, the teachers’ work established a connection and gaps between the two.

During the 2010-2011 school year, teachers blocked out a scope and sequence of when the standards would be introduced, taught, and assessed, breaking the school year into four 10-week quarters. With this work, District 32 had unpacked the new ELA standards and was now ready to begin writing its own ELA curriculum incorporating the CCSS. Over the course of this school year, lessons were built into units until each grade level had its first ELA instructional unit based on the new standards. Additional instructional units of study have been developed at varying paces based on the competency of the grade-level teams of teachers. This initial work with the CCSS provided teachers of District 32 with a degree of understanding about these new teaching standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013a).

Professional development is something that District 32 has been deeply involved in since the summer of 2011 when teachers and administrators attended Carol Anne Tomlinson’s Summer Institute on Academic Diversity (SIAD) at the University of Virginia to increase their knowledge of differentiated instruction. Teachers continued

attending for four consecutive summers, bringing the total number attendees getting this first-hand professional development from Dr. Tomlinson and her colleagues to approximately 50 educators. This type of instructional practice was informed by the work of Wiggins and McTighe in *Understanding by Design*, in which they profess curriculum design that identifies and understands learning standards before creating learning targets and assessments all before constructing learning activities and instruction. This progression is to ensure the backward design process (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012).

This work in implementing differentiated instruction provided District 32 teachers with another opportunity to grow comfortable and competent with the CCSS. A deeper appreciation and understanding of the standards then resulted from teachers creating their own SGAs, a part of the teacher evaluation process. Governor Pat Quinn of Illinois signed the Performance Evaluation Reform Act in 2011 mandating student growth to be a determinant in teacher evaluation (Franczekraderlet, 2011). Teachers in District 32 designed their own common assessments by grade level and subject based on the CCSS. A part of this assessment design included work with CCSS-based rubrics. The use of standards-based rubrics assisted in consistent scoring of the assessments and added additional experience for teachers working with learning standards.

Culture

Wagner et al. (2006) identifies culture as shared beliefs and values within a system (p. 102). The culture in District 32 deserves exploration in the following areas: initiative fatigue, lack of teachers involved in decision-making, and low expectations for students.

Initiative Fatigue

Because of all of these instructional expectations and experiences that have occurred over the past five years, some District 32 teachers report a certain measure of initiative fatigue. A favorite topic that occasionally crops up in team and department meetings is that District 32 is involved in too many new things. Teachers express that they are pulled in multiple directions and not able to master or become comfortable with an initiative before a new one is introduced. Reeves (2009) stated:

Initiative fatigue occurs when teachers are expected to participate in new professional experiences repeatedly. Initiative fatigue can also result from the addition of new educational constructs that are started and then ignored never reaching their fruition. (p. 14)

According to the 2014-2015 District 32 *High Impact Guide* (HIG), the official instructional manual for district teachers:

While the HIG was developed in 2010 and modified each year based on what we have learned, our four high priority initiatives have remained constant. These are well-aligned, coherent, and mutually reinforcing initiatives that add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual parts. (Bensenville School District 2, 2014a)

The four “priority initiatives” as they are referred to in the HIG support creating a responsive learning environment, essential understanding of the CCSS, formative assessment that includes pre-assessment, and data-driven instruction that includes purposeful grouping of students (Bensenville School District 2, 2014a). The professional development offered to District 32 teachers through work at Tomlinson’s SIAD and Rick

Stiggins' Assessment Training Institute both support the implementation of these four robust initiatives. Beyond external professional development opportunities, District 32 offers teachers internal support through local professional development opportunities from district administration, building administration, and district teachers who attended the out-of-town trainings. The addition of instructional programs over the five-year span may be contributing to this perception of initiative fatigue. Some of the programs introduced to support these priority initiatives include demonstration classrooms, educational instructional rounds, the Race To The Top grant, teacher-created SGAs, student achievement collaboratives¹, teacher-created curricular units, common assessments, and a District 32 Inter-rater Reliability Team² (Bensenville School District 2).

Though these programs are not new initiatives, they do represent additional work for teachers, which may have diminished the clarity of what exactly constitutes an initiative in their eyes. The HIG clearly states, "We recognize that the four priority initiatives are 'meaty.' This is why we have stayed the course and are entering Year 5 with the same four initiatives" (Bensenville School District 2, 2014a).

Lack of Teachers Involved in Decision Making

Some District 32 teachers feel they do not play a decisive role in determining the direction the district is headed. This opinion is made apparent in the internal data gathered in the District 32 Spring Teacher Survey. In this survey, teachers were asked to

¹SACs are sub-release days designed for teachers to have rich conversations with administrators and interventionists about specific students or groups of students based on student data (Bensenville School District 2, 2014a, p. 21).

² The District 2 Inter-rater Reliability Team spot-checks the creation and scoring of SGAs that are included in teacher evaluation (Bensenville School District 2, 2014a, p. 21).

comment on the following statement: “I have input into instructional decisions in my school” (Bensenville School District 2, 2014b). Some comments by teachers reflect an understanding that Illinois State Board of Education directives affect the degree to which teachers’ suggestions can be acted upon. For example, “With state mandates, I don’t feel any educator, has real input into instructional decisions.” Other opinions suggest teachers feel marginalized in the decision-making process: “My voice is never heard,” and “Instructional decisions in D32 are top-down.” These comments suggest teachers feel their influence over instructional decisions within the district is limited. However, the reverse opinion can be found within the same survey: “The department is given a lot of freedom in determining instructional practices that are happening within our classrooms.” Though it is not a unanimous feeling, some teachers in District 32 feel they have little to do with their school or district’s decisions on instructional practice (Bensenville School District 2, 2014b).

Low Expectations for Students

The District 32 student demographic data suggests that many students are potentially at-risk learners. Though this is sometimes the case for general education students in District 32, it is particularly the case of students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). These students with special needs are sometimes not provided instruction that has the rigor necessary to help them attain grade-level elements of the CCSS. Though differentiated instruction is inherent in special education services, students of this demographic group sometimes are held to expectations that do not challenge them enough. The culture within the district does not always support students with special needs being adequately challenged. A result of this lack of rigor with certain students is

possibly reflected in the gap in standardized assessment data on the ISAT. ISAT reading data suggests eight percent of students with disabilities in District 32 met or exceeded state standards while 56% of general education students in District 32 did so producing an achievement gap³ of 48%. Similarly ISAT math data suggests 14% of students with disabilities in District 32 met or exceeded state standards while 64% of general education students in District 32 did so, an achievement gap of 50%.

The achievement gap phenomenon occurs with limited English proficient (LEP) students as well. The teacher-created curriculum has illustrated a need to ratchet up the rigor of instruction afforded the District 32 LEP population. ISAT reading data suggests nine percent of LEP students in District 32 met or exceeded state standards while 62% of District 32 non-LEP students met or exceeded state standards to produce an achievement gap of 53%. Similarly ISAT math data suggests 18% of LEP students in District 32 met or exceeded standards while 69% of District 32 non-LEP students met or exceeded standards to produce an achievement gap of 51%.

Conditions

Wagner et al. (2006) define conditions to be “the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangement of time, space, and resources” (p. 101). Significant conditions worth discussing in District 32 include insufficient data collection tools, and insufficient means of communication.

³ The term "achievement gap" is often defined as the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low-income students compared to their white or non-disadvantaged peers (National Education Association, 2015).

Insufficient Data Collection Tools

A major conditional limitation in District 32 is the lack of a composite data management system. Currently data are gathered and stored in spreadsheets by teacher name and by assessment type. This limited approach to data management requires additional work by teachers loading data and by anyone wishing to analyze the data. An element of human error is pervasive in this method of data storage. Beyond the possibility of inaccurate data, this narrow system does not allow for immediate comparisons of different data points for the same student or groups of students. In order to make a comparison of two assessment results, a researcher must toggle between different spreadsheets again providing an opportunity for human error and user frustration.

An additional limitation of this data collection system is it is only accessible on District 32 campuses. This restricts the value of this system as teachers and administrators cannot continue working with student data while at home or at night and weekends. The way District 32 educators get around this data restraint is by printing student data spreadsheets to take home. District personnel view this as time-consuming and short-lived in usefulness as the spreadsheets become obsolete when new data are added. This procedure is antiquated, wasteful, and potentially inaccurate. This type of data collection system breeds an anti-data sentiment with users throughout the district and works as a disadvantage to moving to standards-based grading.

Insufficient Means of Communicating

Because there are differing schedules at the elementary buildings as compared to the middle school in District 32, teachers in these different instructional settings are

provided varied amounts of collaborative meeting time. Due to the middle school philosophy adopted at Prairie, there is time built into each school day for these teachers to meet collaboratively either as a grade-level, in academic teams, or content departments. However at the elementary level, teachers are not provided this opportunity daily and face an additional challenge of bridging the communication gap between two separate elementary school campuses. Elementary-level teachers are afforded two to three collaborative meeting times a week with colleagues within their own building; however, these meetings times may not coincide with those of their grade-level counterparts, their most beneficial collaborative partners. This obstacle emerges because of the specials⁴ scheduling at the elementary level. This schedule for elementary teachers results in their having more limited collaborative teacher conversations than middle school teachers. However all teachers in the district are provided an hour of collaborative time on Thursday afternoons due to the students' day ending an hour early. Though this hour a week is beneficial, it is not sufficient. In order to successfully move to standards-based grading, effective teacher collaboration time will need to be allotted for all teachers.

A major way in which schools communicate with stakeholders in the twenty-first century is through the school or district website. The program District 32 has employed to assist in website design is incredibly difficult to master for individuals with average technological skills. The webpages for the district and schools are frequently out-of-date, limiting their value as communication tools. Because of these inaccuracies and obsolete communications, stakeholders may reduce the use of our district and schools' websites as a beneficial means for gathering information. Because the web design program is so

⁴ Specials classes include art, music, library time, and physical education.

cumbersome, personnel within the district have given up on using the website for the dissemination of information that will be valuable as we move toward a change in our grading practices.

One of the biggest communication shortfalls in District 32 involves the use of an antiquated student report card. Currently students in kindergarten through eighth grade receive a traditional letter grade of A, B, C, D, or F. As teachers embark on creating units of study and assessments based on the CCSS, the use of a traditional A through F report card has become increasingly difficult and inadequate. A disaggregated means of reporting student successes and struggles would be far more accurate if a standards-based reporting system were put into place. Data from the District 32 Spring Teacher Survey suggest a change to standards-based grading is precisely what some teachers desire. On this survey, teachers were asked to comment on this statement: “I have appropriate tools to communicate with parents about their child’s progress” (Bensenville School District 2, 2014b). Teachers at the elementary level made such comments as, “We need a standards-based report card. It’s been talked about for years—when is it finally happening?” Another elementary-level teacher commented, “I feel we need to move to [a] standards-based card as soon as possible so we can better inform parents of their child’s progress.” A teacher from the middle school shared these sentiments through the statement, “We need to move towards standards-based grading to match our SGAs.” Another middle school teacher shared the following:

Trying to assess students on the standards and then somehow translating that into a letter grade on a report card is difficult. I can talk to parents about how my department is assessing something, but not all departments are on the same page.

This makes communication with parents quite difficult.

The current method for reporting student successes is not as beneficial as it could be.

Some District 32 teachers have expressed that reporting student progress in a disaggregated fashion based on standards would provide a more accurate view of student performance (Bensenville School District 2, 2014b).

Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) stated that competencies involve the skills and talents that influence student learning within an educational system (p. 99). Numerous District 32 teachers, through their work with Carol Ann Tomlinson, have a working knowledge of the theory of differentiated instruction. Many more teachers within the district have a foundational understanding of differentiated instruction from local professional development opportunities led by those who attended Tomlinson's SIAD conference in Virginia. Widespread knowledge of differentiation basics exists with District 32 teachers even if they are not practicing this instructional philosophy on a daily basis. Similarly, District 32 teachers possess differing levels of understanding of what Rick Stiggins calls "assessment literacy." Though fewer teachers have attended Stiggins' ATI, the information from these assessment conferences has infiltrated the professional conversations of District 32 teachers. Like with differentiation, teachers implement elements of this assessment philosophy to varying degrees based on the professional development afforded them.

Though some teachers in District 32 have expressed a desire to pursue a standards-based approach to reporting student progress, many teachers maintain an insufficient understanding of how this could benefit all stakeholders. The advantage of

this approach to grading students needs to be more commonplace with all teachers.

Beyond teachers, students need to be shown how receiving feedback based on standards can benefit their learning. Disaggregated feedback based on individual standards can greater inform students' learning and possibly increase their appreciation for it.

Additionally, parents need to learn how to interpret the data from a report card based on multiple standards in order to have a grasp of where their child is in relation to learning expectations. This understanding by parents will allow them to assist in supporting their child's learning.

Teachers in District 32 currently have an insufficient level of competency with how to manage scoring student performances based on multiple standards. This is not a surprising fact as these teachers are experienced at providing students and parents with a single letter grade to report student progress. This limited perspective will need to be addressed as teachers begin to manage multiple aspects of what was once a single letter grade score. Managing the reporting of student progress in an expanded report-card format will be an area of growth for teachers.

District 32 teachers lack adequate ability to communicate and solve problems together. Though teachers are provided opportunities to collaborate, local survey data suggests they are not innately equipped to perform this task effectively (Finch, 2016). During an evaluation of the district's SGA program, teachers' perceptions of the collaboration process were explored. A majority of teachers responded positively when asked if collaboration increased through the development of teacher-created SGAs. Many teachers also stated that this process was beneficial to their instructional practice. However, numerous teachers reported that teachers are not naturally skilled in the act of

collaboration. During teacher interviews in this research, it was revealed that teachers perceive themselves and their colleagues as needing support in this regard. One particular area of growth for teachers involved their ability to give and receive critical feedback. This research revealed teachers often are territorial regarding their instructional and assessment practices and take professional criticism personally (Finch). This is another area of growth for the teachers of District 32 if a change to standards-based grading is to take place.

SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In order to fully understand where stakeholders opinions lie with respect to standards-based grading, quantitative and qualitative data were collected to demonstrate students' and teachers' understandings of this method used to report student progress—particularly how it differs from traditional use of letter grades. Beyond gathering stakeholders' understandings of standards-based grading, stakeholders' perceptions regarding this method's purpose were also measured. Data were gathered to better explain the context, conditions, and culture under which stakeholders operate in addition to stakeholders' current competencies. Collecting this data informed the necessary aspects needed to implement a successful change plan.

Understanding where District 32 stakeholders are with respect to these components of Wagner's 4 Cs served as a needs assessment as the district moved toward the implementation of standards-based grading. Through the gathering of this data, stakeholders were enlightened as to how this means of organizing and reporting student success could easily surpass the status quo of traditional letter grade reporting. Providing stakeholders with information related to the value of such feedback informed them how standards-based grading shifts students' perception of school from that of points-gathering and grades to one of knowledge acquisition and learning.

Participants

During this research on standards-based grading implementation, data were gathered from students and teachers. Both teachers and students provided a range of quantitative data for the study through a separate survey designed for each stakeholder

group. Qualitative data were collected from a select group of teachers participating in the standards-based instructional unit in this study.

Students

Teachers' comfort and competency levels with respect to their ability to deliver standards-based instruction determined the selection of students for this study. Teachers who expressed an interest or had experience using standards for reporting student progress were considered for the study. Data were gathered from these teachers' students regarding perceptions of the value of standards-based grading based on student experiences during the standards-based unit of instruction.

Teachers

A survey of all District 32 teachers occurred at the start of the school year in order to gauge the knowledge and comfort level of all teachers with respect to having a standards-based mindset, the value of standards-based grading, and the foundations of quality assessment. According to Schimmer (2013):

A standards-based mindset is separate from how we report grades. With a standards-based mindset you can still report traditional grades, it's just that how you determine grades is significantly different. Teachers with a standards-based mindset eliminate the influence of non-learning factors from their grade books. Survey data were used to design necessary professional development for the teachers of District 32 in order to aid a successful change in grading practice.

After an informal assessment of different grade-level teams with building principals within the district, the decision was made to invite three fourth-grade teachers at Williams Elementary School, as well as two seventh-grade math teachers and one

sixth-grade ELA teacher at Prairie Middle School to be a part of the study. Participating teachers agreed to deliver a four-to-six week standards-based unit of instruction to their students. All teachers and students involved in this research participated voluntarily. The students of participating teachers in these three grade level settings were offered the opportunity to be involved in this research and data gathering.

Data Collection Techniques

A mixed-method approach was used to gather comprehensive data that was both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data were collected from both students and teachers with respect to standards-based grading. All surveys consisted of a three to five Likert scale response option that included a neutral response for questions with five response choices. All surveys were administered using SurveyMonkey. In addition, some teachers in the study voluntarily participated in the group interview.

Surveys

Quantitative data were gathered on teachers and students in this study. A survey of all District 32 teachers occurred at the start of the school year in order to gauge the knowledge and comfort level of all teachers with respect to having a standards-based mindset, the value of standards-based grading, and foundations of quality assessment. Nineteen of these questions had additional comment boxes to collect further data from teachers.

Students participating in this standards-based unit of instruction took a survey to gather perceptions regarding the value of this method of reporting student successes. The survey probed the value of standards-based grading versus the traditional letter grade feedback that is currently the norm in District 32. This student survey was administered

after students completed a four-to-six week standards-based instructional unit. Additionally, survey questions addressed if traditional letter grades promoted student accountability in their own learning and if students valued letter grade scores over learning in their current school experience. This survey was administered using SurveyMonkey.

Group Interview

Data from the survey of all District 32 teachers informed the questions for the group interview that followed. The interview took place with two fourth-grade teachers and two seventh-grade teachers and was conducted at the close of the standards-based unit of instruction and grading. A major focus of this interview included questions about the implementation of standards-based instruction and if such grading increased teachers' abilities to deliver targeted instruction to students. Additionally, questions focused on if this targeted instruction allowed for increased accountability in students as compared to the status quo of using letter grades. Additionally, teachers were asked if students' focus was more on learning or their desire to acquire a high grade. A final focus of the group interview included procedural feedback on the impact of this type of instruction as it relates to the teachers' time, effort, and preparation.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed in order to determine the potential benefits of standards-based grading for students and teachers. Both quantitative and qualitative data were examined to establish potential recommendations to support a successful change plan.

Survey data were aggregated into combined-positive responses, which included both "agree" and "strongly agree" options and combined-negative responses, which

included both “disagree” and “strongly disagree” options. These data informed how the change plan would be shaped based on stakeholders’ needs.

Data from the group interview with teachers were analyzed and coded for emergent themes. Experiences or perspectives that benefitted students, increased student accountability in their learning, or increased student efficacy as learners were recommended in the change plan. Experiences or perspectives that benefitted teachers, increased teachers’ efficacy with instruction, or increased their understanding of how to implement standards-based grading were also recommended in the change plan.

SECTION FOUR: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature and research that relates to standards-based grading is a formidable collection. Educational experts have published books exploring multiple aspects of standards-based grading and this topic has been the focus of numerous dissertations as well. The literature explored in this change plan includes the areas of student motivation as it relates to grades, the benefits of standards-based grading, implementation of standards-based grading, and the impact this method of grading has on student learning.

Student Motivation

Student motivation is an important consideration for teachers in the classroom as motivation might influence a child's level of learning. Literature from both practitioners and theorists has been published regarding this subject. Pink (2009) and Kohn (1999) provided comprehensive references of research related to motivation both in and out of the classroom with a valuable focus on grades. Solarz (2015) and Dueck (2014) both teachers, shared their own findings on student motivation and learning as it relates to grades.

Daniel Pink (2009) presented a compelling case that challenges some of society's traditional views regarding motivation. Pink first sorted people into the categories of *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* as it relates to their focus of motivation. In his discussion on motivation, Pink categorized people as *Type X* (extrinsically motivated people) and *Type I* (intrinsically motivated people) (p. 76). Not surprising, intrinsically motivated people are propelled to complete tasks for themselves or a connected value in completing the

task, while extrinsically motivated people complete tasks for detached or unrelated reasons such as rewards.

Pink (2009) then described the evolution of motivation before revealing his three elements of motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Pink discussed the evolution of the human desire to succeed by describing what he calls Motivation 1.0, the foundational level of human drive. He then continued to describe the behaviorists' theory of the carrot and the stick to define what he calls Motivation 2.0 (p. 16). The behaviorist approach supports the theory that humans do things when they receive extrinsic rewards, and they avoid things that cause negative consequences. According to Pink, it is not until the individual attains what he calls Motivation 3.0, that a person truly reaches an authentic level of drive that supports success (p. 19). Pink stated,

The most successful people, the evidence shows, often aren't directly pursuing conventional notions of success. They're working hard and persisting through difficulties because of their internal desire to control their lives, learn about their world, and accomplish something that endures. (p. 77)

Pink believes that in order for individuals to be motivated to succeed, there must be more for them to connect to than extrinsic rewards. People need value and engagement in order to have a vested interest in succeeding.

To create that vested interest, Pink (2009) suggested it is necessary for one to have autonomy, mastery, and a purpose in the work. Pink professed that autonomy is important for success because it leads to engagement, which leads to mastery, which leads to the desire to improve (p. 108). According to Pink:

The science shows that the secret to high performance isn't our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive—our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to make a contribution. (pp. 144-145)

This informs Pink's third element of motivation: purpose.

Finally, Pink (2009) argued that success in school is not necessarily related to an acute understanding of content, as many people may believe. Instead of a demonstration of mastery of the curriculum, grades are more a demonstration of the mastery of procedures related to school. According to Pink, "Good grades become a reward for compliance—but don't have much to do with learning" (pp. 187-188). Grades are often a reflection of the behavioral level measures that relate to school performance such as compliance in attendance, timeliness, effort, and obeisance of rules. According to the work of Pink, in order for students to invest in learning, they need to have the intrinsic motivation (motivation 3.0) and see purpose, having autonomy to achieve mastery.

Kohn (1999) offered an unforgiving review of grades' value as they relate to the motivation of students. He not only believed a behaviorist approach to motivating students is ineffective but also made the case that it is actually counterproductive in the fight to motivate students to learn. Kohn stressed the limited value grades offer stakeholders and the damaging effects they can have on some students.

One aspect of Kohn's (1999) work involved how the behaviorist approach to human motivation is flawed as it relates to students and school. Kohn believed that the work of Skinner, which invoked the belief in extrinsic motivation through the use of rewards such as grades, was fundamentally ineffective when motivating students to

increase academic performance. Kohn supported the belief that extrinsic motivation stifles intrinsic motivation—the ultimate goal in student learning. According to Kohn, “The carrot-and-the-stick approach in general is unsuccessful; grades in particular undermine intrinsic motivation and learning, which only serves to increase our reliance on them” (p. 201). Not only did Kohn believe that grades were ineffective when it comes to motivating students, he believed this perpetuated the false belief in the value of grades. Kohn accentuated his argument regarding the futile use of grades as a method for motivating students when he stated, “We can almost watch the interest drain away each time a teacher invokes a bribe (‘C’mon, Ellen, you’re so close to getting an A in here’) or a threat (‘Do you want a zero, young man?’)” (p. 151).

Another component of Kohn’s (1999) work involved the over-focus on performance and how it limits motivation of students and can shift the emphasis from learning to task completion. Kohn supported the thinking that when the focus of school becomes academic performance, learning suffers. According to Kohn, “Not only rewards but anything that makes students preoccupied with how well they are doing will lead them to choose the easiest possible task: the point is to do well, not to learn” (p. 158). This is an essential misunderstanding about grades as they relate to student motivation. Kohn went on to explain how such feedback is limited in its value regarding performance. Kohn stated,

A B+ at the top of a paper tells a student nothing about what was impressive about the paper or how it could be improved. A substantive comment that does offer such information, meanwhile, gains nothing from the addition of the B+. (p. 202)

The long-held belief that grades offer students valuable feedback with respect to their learning and that they serve as a motivator falls under direct scrutiny from Kohn who stated, “The problem is not just that grades don’t say enough about people’s performance; it’s that the process of grading fixes their attention *on* their performance” (p. 202). When evaluating student performance becomes the driving purpose of school, the value of learning is greatly diminished.

A strong emphasis on grades in education can create a number of issues that negatively impact learning. It is worth considering interest as a measure of success in school as grades weaken the natural joy of learning, encourage cheating, strain teacher/student relationships, diminish student ownership of learning, and dilute students’ self-concept (Kohn, 1999, p. 204). Increased anxiety is a natural occurrence in students when grades are associated with learning. This can affect students’ appreciation for learning as well as create moral challenges involving honesty. Connections between student and teacher can be negatively impacted as students view learning through the lens of winning or losing. Students fixated on grades can begin to lose control of their learning and begin to lose faith in themselves and their ability to learn. Kohn stressed that parents represent the one stakeholder group who needs to be a part of limiting the value of grading in education. Kohn stated, “After reading the evidence and weighing the arguments, it makes sense for parents to consider putting aside grades and scores as indicators of success and to look instead at a child’s *interest* in learning” (p. 207).

Further investigation into such literature finds the summative nature of grading called into question yet again. Dueck (2014) stated,

Unfortunately, schools have trained students to be grade-focused rather than learning-focused. As educators, we have placed incredible importance upon grades, and too often we have not allowed students to do anything to improve their results after they've been assessed. (p. 101)

By emphasizing the finality of grades, educators signal an end to learning for students. This limited perspective is detrimental in the quest for creating continuous, lifelong learners in students. The term, *lifelong learner*, was designed to illustrate a student's desire to learn beyond their time spent in school. An over-emphasis on grades creates an opportunity to snuff out the learning journey before a student even completes the semester. Putting a grade on a paper may be equivalent to putting a shelf life on learning. Dueck has seen through his own experiences as a high school teacher, a shift in students' mindset when they are given the chance to continue to demonstrate understanding after a grade has been shared. Dueck stated,

Why should students care about what they should have done on any given test if they aren't given a chance to revisit it? I have personally seen students in my class shift from apathetic to engaged when tests were returned to them. (pp. 101-102)

When students revisit material and assessments after an evaluation, it establishes the culture that learning doesn't end when an assessment is administered.

Dueck (2014) stated that what motivates students more than grades is tapping into their individual interest for instruction and assessment. Dueck also purported the value in offering flexibility to students as to how they demonstrate understanding. In order to motivate students, it is necessary to know them as individuals. Dueck stated, "Engagement is the key to unlocking the intrinsic motivation to learn. Clearly, people are

more engaged when tasks interest them” (p. 121). In order to truly motivate a student, it is imperative that the learning is engaging. In order to secure engagement, an educator has to take the time to learn about students’ interests. These interests can then be leveraged to maximize motivation. Dueck also wrote of the importance of allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge in different fashions based on their individual strengths. According to Dueck, “The availability of range of response modes can motivate reluctant learners. I have seen students who were unwilling to express their responses in writing confidently pick up their pencils and draw their evidence of knowledge and understanding instead” (p. 137). Utilizing student interests and allowing multiple ways for students to express their understanding can increase student motivation when grades have not.

Solarz (2015) stressed the importance of learning over grades and how this relationship affects learning. Solarz recognized the ingenuity of students in manipulating a grading system to acquire points while perhaps diminishing learning. According to Solarz, “Unfortunately, when grades, rewards or punishments are a child’s only motivation for doing well in school, he or she will find ways to work the system and miss the educational value of the lesson” (p. 80). A teacher of fifth grade, Solarz did not see value in grades, but instead saw the harm that grades might induce. Solarz stated, “I *don’t* want them worrying about what grade they’ll receive when the work is done! For that matter, I don’t want them to think learning is ever ‘done’” (p. 82). A challenge of establishing a perpetual learning environment can be diminished by the effects of traditional grading practices.

In Solarz's classroom, a focus on feedback over grades has produced positive results. According to Solarz (2015), "Assessment and feedback, rather than a focus on grades, pushes students toward constant growth" (pp. 81-82). This perspective is not just held by the teacher. Students in this class are aware of how they should focus on learning and not the points they gather or grades. Solarz shared the written response of a student in his class: "I think it is good that grades don't matter and that the only thing [that] matters is improvement. If we are improving that means were [*sic*] good students learning new things" (p. 102). These examples from the classroom demonstrate how growth can occur in a more genuine and motivating fashion when grades are not involved in the learning process.

Benefits

The work of Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), O'Connor (2009), and Vatterott (2015) all extolled the supreme value of using standards-based grading to increase student learning. Brookhart made the point that the evaluation of students should be based on achievement, which does not occur with traditional grading practices. Guskey stated four shortcomings of traditional letter grading while O'Connor provided seven critical perspectives on traditional grading. Vatterott asserted that to make the shift to standards-based grading, it is imperative to recognize the inherent damage assigning letter grades can do to learning.

According to Brookhart (2011), "Grading on achievement says we value learning. It reinforces our commitment about learning we make to students and parents" (p. 17). In order to accurately record the achievement of students, academic data must be free of all behavioral factors. One of the downfalls of using traditional letter grades involves the

combination of many different assessment components not related to academics.

Brookhart stated, “If grades are based on achievement, students and teachers can use the information better than if the grades represent a mixture of learning and other factors” (p. 18). These other factors often include such things as class participation, timeliness of work completion, or ability to collaborate which are not related to demonstrating understanding of the academic material or skills. Brookhart continued, “The recommendation to grade on standards of achievement only, separating assessment of effort, improvement, and behavior into a separate appraisal, is the current mainstream recommendation” (p. 15).

A misalignment of standardized test scores and student grades is an indicator that something is not right with either the instruction or assessment used to evaluate students. Standards-based grading increases the connection with classroom instruction and assessment to the standardized testing outcomes. According to Brookhart (2011),

If a district claims that curriculum and instruction are aligned with state standards and the district uses a standards-based grading system, it makes sense that students’ proficiency according to teacher-assigned report card grades should be related to their proficiency according to state test results. (p. 16)

However, this premise only holds true if the standardized assessment administered by the state is truly aligned to the state learning standards.

Guskey (2002) detailed the problems with traditional grading practices that involve representing student learning through the use of a single letter grade. Guskey first stated that the use of a single letter grade can produce an unclear representation of learning when he wrote that “Many teachers combine product, process, and progress

evidence in a single grade” (p. 45). Guskey defined *product* to be a student’s specific achievements or performance levels, *process* to be how a student got to their understanding (with or without retests, collaboratively with peers, with appropriate class participation) independent of the level reached by the student, and *progress* to be the individual gain attained from the student’s learning experience (p. 29). When these three unique forms of data are combined into one performance symbol such as a letter grade, the degree of accuracy of academic understanding greatly diminishes. Guskey furthered this point by stating, “Using multiple grades relieves teachers of the difficult task of having to combine so many diverse sources of evidence in a single symbol” (pp. 46-47). In order to report student understandings that are not muddled or impure, leaders in the field of assessment suggest an expanded format to report student successes through multiple success indicators and not a single letter grade (Guskey, p. 31).

A second pitfall of using traditional grading methods involves how stakeholders understand the symbol or letter grade. Parents present a common challenge for educators when progressive methods of reporting student successes are employed. Parents frequently rely on their own experiences in school to draw conclusions about grades. Though grades can compare students’ performances against learning standards or learning objectives as in criterion-referenced assessments, sometimes grades compare students to the performance of their peers or norm-referenced assessments (Guskey, 2002, p. 27). Guskey declared, “Despite educators’ best efforts, many parents interpret letter grades in strictly norm-referenced terms.” This revelation highlights the lack of specificity in a single letter grade format and the amount of explanation needed to communicate what students understand.

Grading scales for traditional letter grades vary from district to district, from school to school, and in some cases from classroom to classroom. These different approaches to grading stem from teachers' differing views on assessing students. According to Guskey (2002), "A third shortcoming of letter grades is that the cutoffs between grade categories are always arbitrary and difficult to justify" (p. 45). Some teachers believe in a 10-point scale where an A can be obtained through a score of 90% through 100%. Other teachers find that scale to be lacking rigor and believe an A can be obtained through a score of 93% to 100%. These different scales for establishing an A grade create a circumstance of inconsistency.

Guskey (2002) closed his argument regarding the value of a standards-based approach to grading by stressing the limitations of a single symbol method of reporting student understanding. Guskey stated, "Letter grades lack the richness of other more detailed reporting methods, such as standards-based grading or narratives" (p. 46). Guskey further declared the limitations to the use of letter grades when he wrote:

To clarify the meaning of letter grades, therefore most schools include a key or legend on the reporting form that pairs each letter grade with a word or descriptive phrase. If not carefully chosen, however, descriptors can lead to additional complications and misunderstanding. (p. 43)

Educators over the years have recognized the drawback to reporting student understanding through the use of a single symbol such as the letter. This realization has introduced supplemental methods of adding additional detail to the letter grade. As Guskey pointed out, this additional information can at times lessen the understanding of what a student has actually learned.

O'Connor (2009) supported the notion that grades have the potential to shift the focus of school from learning to that of collecting points for a grade. According to O'Connor, "The problem in the school system is that, as soon as grades are introduced, teachers, parents, and students emphasize grades rather than learning" (p. 17). This fundamental problem with our educational system is then highlighted by O'Connor's seven perspectives on grading that speak to the value of grades and the grading process. O'Connor stated these perspectives were developed by assessment specialists that include Stiggins, McTighe, and Guskey (p. 16). O'Connor's seven perspectives on grading include:

- grading is not essential for learning
- grading is complicated
- grading is subjective and emotional
- grading is inescapable
- grading has limited research base
- grading has an emerging consensus about best practice
- grading that is faulty damages students—and teachers (p. 17).

This list illustrates the limitations traditional grading practices might have and presents the case that an alternative method of reporting student understandings is worth pursuing. Most notable in this list is how faulty grading practices can cause harm to both students and teachers.

Based on his seven perspectives on grading, O'Connor (2009) believed traditional grading practices must change. O'Connor declared, "Traditional grading practices need to change so that grading aligns with standards and support current assessment and

evaluation philosophy and practices” (p. 41). This comment alludes to the evolution of progressive thinking about grading, which includes standards-based grading. O’Connor declared his support for this method of reporting student learning when he stated, “Basing grades on standards also gives us the most appropriate base for reporting in standards-based systems—a grade for each standard or learning goal” (p. 38). By delivering an individual score for each learning standard or goal included in the instruction, a more accurate measure of student understanding may result compared to a traditional single letter grade.

Vatterott (2015) opened her argument with a chilling testimony regarding the failures of our traditional method of grading students through the use of single letter grades. According to Vatterott, “I have seen firsthand the damage we have done, and how we have handicapped [students] for college by giving grades that don’t reflect learning” (pp. 1-2). This personal testament as to why a change in how we report student understandings leads to an endorsement of a standards-based approach to evaluating students. Vatterott stated, “To shift to a standards-based grading paradigm, we must acknowledge how traditional grading practices obstruct the learning process, damage motivation, and cause teachers and students to fixate on grades to the detriment of learning” (p. 37). She went on to recognize how the focus of school can misleadingly be grades and not learning for some students.

Like many in the field of education, Vatterott (2015) believed grades are not a motivator for students and in fact can negatively impact students in their pursuit of learning. According to Vatterott, “The grade, not learning, becomes the goal, encouraging the extrinsic motivation of reward and punishment. What has developed is a barter

system—a *quid pro quo*: ‘I work, you pay,’ with points as the currency” (p. 35). The currency Vatterott spoke of is the points students collect toward a grade. When students are allowed—or worse yet encouraged—to shift the focus of school from learning to acquisition of grades, serious implications can result with respect to student learning. Vatterott continued, “In our relentless pursuit of the almighty A and the perfect GPA, something got lost—learning. Grades became the be-all end-all, the goal itself, not an indicator of achieving the goal of learning” (p. 18). Through first-hand experience, Vatterott delivered poignant reasons for the need to address the drawbacks of traditional grading practices.

Implementation

Stephens (2010) conducted a limited study exploring the degree to which teachers in rural Nebraska were implementing standards-based grading. Selby (2012) focused research on the importance of leadership in the standards-based grading implementation process. Lawrence (2011) explored how teachers working in professional learning communities in a high school setting could discuss assessment and grading practices such as standards-based grading. Adrian (2012) explored teacher concerns in an elementary school district implementing standards-based grading. Szymczak (2015) presented five conclusions from research on implementing standards-based grading at the middle school level while Ulrich (2012) presented six core factors for successful implementation of standards-based grading at the middle-level setting.

Stephens (2010) conducted a single 32-item survey in a study of 635 rural Nebraska teachers (p. 40). The primary research question for this study was, “How and to what degree are rural seventh- through twelfth-grade English language arts teachers in

Nebraska using standards-based grading practices in their classrooms?” (p. 5). Stephens declared, “Underlying this purpose was the intent to investigate the knowledge base of teachers regarding their understanding of the interconnectedness of standards-based assessment, teaching and learning, and standards-based grading” (p. 31).

Stephens (2010) made three recommendations at the conclusion of this research. The first recommendation involved solidifying assessment consistency and literacy in order to reduce subjectivity in grades. According to Stephens:

Part of the work of professional learning communities is to provide the professional development necessary to embark on the journey toward standards-based grading, including identifying the clear targets, developing quality assessments, and then determining what criteria or components are utilized when determining a student’s grade. (p. 77)

The second recommendation from this study addressed teacher preparation programs and the need to increase assessment literacy. Stephens stated, “Based on the results of the study it is apparent that additional time and support must be allocated to the work of standards, assessment, and accountability in pre-service teacher education” (p. 78). The third recommendation that resulted from this study suggested the need for an increase in student involvement in self-assessing and grading. According to Stephens, educators should “focus attention of training teachers on ways to include students in the grading process, from identifying clear targets and exemplars to developing the criteria for measuring their own work” (p. 79).

Though the focus of this study is limited in scope, measuring the level of implementation of standards-based grading, the recommendations are valuable to others

attempting to implement this change. One interesting finding in this study revealed that younger, less-experienced teachers do not necessarily see greater value or have a higher degree of knowledge than their more seasoned colleagues when it comes to standards-based grading (p. 69). This is not always the common perception with respect to teachers and this subject.

Selby (2012) explored the value of leadership when educators are actively implementing standards-based grading. According to Selby, this study “focused on selected secondary teachers in a Midwestern school district and their perceptions about leadership support, while currently engaging a change towards utilizing the practice of standards based grading” (p. 22). This case study involved eight teachers and four curriculum coordinators and yielded three major findings.

In order for standards-based grading to be effectively implemented, principal leadership must be apparent. Selby (2012) found, “Teachers indicated that building leadership, both principals and assistant principals, must be knowledgeable and purposeful while helping teachers to increase the effectiveness of their professional knowledge and practice” (p. 42). Beyond administrative leadership, teacher-leadership offerings need to be available in order to foster the capacity of a teaching staff and the sustainability of the standards-based grading movement. According to Selby, “Various leadership opportunities were available to teachers, and were created to formulate a support network where all educators increased their knowledge and ability to grow professionally” (p. 43). The final finding in this study involved the influence of teachers’ personal beliefs regarding assessment practices. Teachers in this study recognized that they had the power to change how they assessed students. Additionally, these teachers

felt there was a need to increase their effectiveness with the standards-based method employed to assess students—even if it was more work for them (pp. 44-45). Selby stated, “Teachers were willing to continue struggling with how to report the most detailed grade to increase the likelihood students would take on a more vested approach in their learning” (p. 45).

Selby (2012) clearly demonstrated that when teachers recognize the limitations of the traditional letter grade method, change is more likely to occur. The teachers in this study saw a need for change in grading practices in order to increase student learning. Selby stated,

The big picture idea was that students played a point’s [*sic*] race for certain levels of a grade, whether that was an A, B, C, or D, based on the traditional percentage grading scale. “Just enough to pass a class” was the motto for many. Based on how much is enough to be successful, without putting too much pressure on themselves, teachers felt students were wanting to meet the mark of success, or barely passing, without concern for excelling to reach their true academic potential. (p. 45)

The low expectations from some students helped propel the necessary momentum to bring about the change needed in grading practices for these educators.

Lawrence (2011) conducted a study of eight high school ELA teachers who all had eight years of experience working with the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model (pp. 37-38). This qualitative study included interviews, meeting observations, and a review of relevant documents related to PLCs and grading (pp. 39-40). The PLC focus of this study offered limited benefits to the implementation of standards-based grading.

The only research question without an overt PLC theme was, “How do the teachers determine if their experimentation with assessment and grading practices was successful?” (p. 48). Two themes emerged from interviews with teachers that supported the value of assessing students using standards over grades.

Though many teachers in this study demonstrated a traditional mindset with respect to grading philosophy, in the end, six out of seven study participants believed the new grading policy had positive results for student learning (Lawrence, 2011, p. 61, p. 113). Teacher input with respect to standards-based grading suggested a feeling that the implementation of standards-based grading was a positive experience. According to Lawrence, “The grades that students earned were more representative of the knowledge the students gained” (p. 113). Another theme from interviews with teachers suggested the change to standards-based grading was beneficial. Lawrence stated, “The [standards-based grading] system also created a more consistent meaning of grades within the team and department” (p. 113). A valuable conclusion from Lawrence’s work involved the need for clear communication from school leaders when implementing standards-based grading. Lawrence suggested that leadership must have a clear purpose and a well-communicated plan. According to Lawrence, “Many [teachers] were unable to see the [standards-based] vision that the administration had for the district” (p. 110).

Adrian (2012) addressed the needs of teachers as they embark upon the implementation of standards-based grading in an elementary school district. According to Adrian, “The objective of this study was to determine the degree to which the transition to standards-based grading will require significant changes in the grading practices of Franklin Pierce Schools’ elementary teachers” (pp. 4-5). Ninety participants were self-

selected from a book-study group on standards-based grading (p. 27). Quantitative and qualitative data regarding the implementation of standards-based grading were collected using the Stages of Concerns Questionnaire survey as well as written responses by teachers prior to the start of the book study and then again at the end of the book study (p. 5).

Two recommendations emerged from this study. The first involved the preparation of teachers to begin implementation of standards-based grading. Adrian (2012) recommended a menu of professional development options for teachers for the initial year that included online grade book support sessions, assessment management support to help prioritize the value of assessment data, grade determination training and practice, progressive grading practices that motivate students, and professional development on how to involve students in the grading process (pp. 53-54). The second recommendation for successful implementation of standards-based grading involved communication. Adrian suggested the benefit of having standards-based grading information disseminated at the district level, posted online, shared at parent meetings, incorporated into formal parent groups such as Parent Teacher Organizations, and organized into common talking points for teachers and administration to secure common language for standards-based grading (p. 54).

Adrian (2012) highlighted concerns that need to be considered in order to have an efficient shift to standards-based grading. The first of these concerns involved educating families about the paradigm shift from traditional letter grading to grading students based on standards. A second concern, which was loosely explained involved the impact standards-based grading might have on students demonstrating growth but without

attainment of grade-level standards. Other issues put forth by Adrian addressed how to assess students who meet grade-level standards at the start of the year and the necessity of establishing consistent grading practices (pp. 43-44).

Szymczak (2015) conducted a case study involving 13 educators in the middle school setting. Participants in this study involved a range of positions including a district assistant superintendent, principal, support service staff, core teachers, and specials teachers. The study consisted of a series of 45-minute interviews based on changing traditional grading practices to standards-based grading practices (p. 55). According to Szymczak, the interviews focused on “(a) descriptions of change process, (b) successes and challenges in implementing standards-based grading, and (c) the perceptions of changes in teacher, learning, and assessment” (pp. 56-58).

The interviews yielded a list of five conclusions that provided insight into how to best implement standards-based grading. The first conclusion, according to the work of Szymczak (2015), involved having

“a well-defined purpose to the new report card. Knowing and being able to explain to other administrators, teachers, parents, and students the purpose for turning upside down a system that has been in place for over 200 years is paramount” (p. 84).

Szymczak further clarified the importance of defining the intention of the change process.

Szymczak urged, “A place to start is a well-crafted statement of purpose” (p. 85).

Szymczak additionally stressed the importance of development, bringing the community along in the change process. This study suggested the need to bridge the gap between new methods and old methods of grading for stakeholders. According to Szymczak,

“Educational leaders would be wise to develop a mechanism, to engage parents broadly in the new reporting system. Leaders could offer advice as to how to use the new system in old ways” (p. 86). An interesting conclusion in Szymczak’s work addressed the temptation for districts to take the measured step of a dual-grading approach, implementing both a traditional letter grade and standards-based grades. Szymczak suggested it is best to resist partial implementation—resist a hybrid approach to employing standards-based grading. Szymczak stated, “While it may have been necessary to reach a compromise on keeping the old system and merging it with the new, ultimately it may provide the excuse or many not to use the new information to help foster learning” (p. 88). This suggestion of full commitment to change was backed by sound reasoning warning that a dual-grades approach could limit the appreciation of the new method of reporting student learning.

A fourth conclusion from Szymczak (2015) included the need for a three-to-five year written plan for the change in grading practice. According to Szymczak, “By carefully planning out each of the steps the school community needs to take, a leader may avoid wasting valuable time or energy by anticipating what the reform will really require before making it the focus of a school or district” (p. 89). A final conclusion suggested developing a pilot program for the implementation of standards-based grading. Szymczak stated, “Allowing for one team to pilot the new report card may help schools uncover problems or find unexpected celebrations. Both of these can be helpful in selling the new system to parents, students, and staff” (p. 90). Implementing a pilot program for standards-based grading provided authentic data to help adjust the change process, and it provided authentic data to positively impact future stakeholders.

The work of Ulrich (2012) involved a case study of 12 sixth-grade teachers who were involved in the implementation of standards-based grading. These teachers participated in one-on-one interviews and two focus-group interviews (pp. 55-56). This research yielded six core factors for the successful implementation of standards-based grading. Ulrich noted that the transition from traditional grading practices to standards-based grades is a slow process. This patient approach is necessary to assure stakeholders are comfortable and secure in the change in grading. According to Ulrich:

[Standards-based grading] warrants time as the most powerful component for successful implementation. Such time allowed for the teachers in this study to learn together, collaborate, try new instructional practices, and build capacity as it pertains to standards-based reporting practices. It should be expected that successful transition from traditional practices to standards-based reporting will take three to five years. (p. 130)

Another major component to making this change in grading successful involved building a culture of trust with stakeholders. Ulrich (2012) stated,

Trust and active engagement in the process of learning and implementing standards-based reporting from the administrators and other instructional support positions provides teachers with feelings of assurance as well as confidence to take risks without the fear of failure and being negatively judged. (pp. 130-131)

Much like an appreciation for students as individuals with unique needs, teachers need this respect in their own learning. Ulrich purported, “According to the teachers in this study, differentiated professional development honoring teacher readiness is crucial in empowering each adult learner to move forward, regardless of where she is on the

performance continuum” (p. 131). Time, trust, and differentiated professional development are core factors to bring about successful change in grading practices.

Ulrich (2012) also stressed the importance of the resources needed to record student performance based on standards. Without the necessary record-keeping documents, a change to standards-based grading is less effective. According to Ulrich,

A reporting tool and grade book that is teacher friendly is essential, one that is categorized by standards. ...the inability to organize and report student performance by standards would be incongruent to the delivery of standards-based reporting practices in the classroom. (p. 131)

Also needed to make this transition in grading practice is a clear and detailed blueprint of the actions needed for change. Ulrich found:

It is imperative to have a proactive plan for including teachers in educating, communicating with, and obtaining feedback from stakeholders on standards-based reporting. Examples include culminating an advisory committee on grading assessment, creating an information wiki or website, generating newsletters, distributing an electronic survey, facilitating town hall meetings, and offering community education classes. (p. 131)

A final consideration to bring about an effective change to standards-based grading involves the recruitment of teachers to help support this change movement. Ulrich explained, “As the transition to standards-based reporting is underway, hiring faculty who believe in the standards-based philosophy is crucial in keeping the organization moving forward” (p. 132). Ulrich’s final three core factors for bringing about a change to

standards-based grading included creating a standards-based data collection tool, having a detailed change plan, and hiring teachers who believe in standards-based grading.

Impact on Student Learning

Dean (2014) explored the impact standards-based grading had on the retention of third- and fifth-grade students while Fink (2015) researched how this method of grading affected student achievement and motivation. Souter (2009) conducted a study to measure the value of feedback as it related to standards-based grading, and Norton (2014) studied the correlation between standardized test data and teacher-assigned grades using both standards-based methods and traditional grading practices.

Dean (2014) examined the correlation between student retention rates as they related to traditional grading and standards-based grading. According to Dean, “The purpose of this study was to determine whether a traditional or standards-based grading system improved third- and fifth-grade retention rates” (p. 74). Dean also explored the significance of traditional grading methods to standards-based grading methods as they related to student gender (pp.75-76). Dean stated:

The participants in this study were third and fifth graders who attended four rural elementary schools in northeast Georgia during the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years. The research included every third- and fifth-grade student who attended the four schools during the above-stated school years. (p. 63)

Student data from these two years were compared based on the grading method students were exposed to: traditional letter grades or standards-based grading. Results from the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Tests were analyzed to determine connections to achievement for both grading method choices (p. 72).

Dean (2014) found that there was no statistically significant difference between the traditional and standards-based grading system for reducing the frequency of retention for third or fifth graders (pp. 92-93). Dean also found there was no statistically significant difference among third- and fifth-grade female or male students' grade retention when transitioning from a traditional grading system to a standards-based grading system" (p. 95, 97). Dean recognized a slight difference between the results of the two types of grading methods. According to Dean, "While there was a slight decrease in the number of students retained under a standards-based grading system, the significance was not enough to reject the null hypothesis"⁵ (p. 115). Throughout this study, there was discussion about measuring the two types of grading methods and the results of implementation. However, there was nothing mentioned about any change in instruction such as is reflected in the "standards-based mindset" (Schimmer, 2013, & Schimmer 2016).

Fink (2015) conducted a study based on traditional grading practices and standards-based grading conducted by the same teachers teaching the same subjects (pp. 6-7). Fink stated, "The purpose of this study is to conduct an intensive investigation into the merits of a standards-based approach to assessment versus a traditional approach to assessment" (p. 6). According to Fink, "In order to ensure both standards-based and traditional grades were calculated on an equivalent scale, the standards-based students' assessment grades were converted to a traditional grading scale..." (p. 80). Students participating in the standards-based grading research completed a survey prior to

⁵ Null hypothesis: The null hypothesis is not the opposite of the research hypothesis. The null hypothesis states that any effects observed after treatment (or associated with a predictor variable) are due to chance alone (University of California Davis).

experiencing standards-based grading and after experiencing this grading method.

Students also participated in small group interviews to provide deeper understanding of student perceptions. A final piece of data involved the comparison of achievement results between participants in the standards-based instruction research and their traditionally graded counter-parts (p. 68).

The findings in this study suggested that students became more aware of their own learning from being exposed to standards-base grading. Fink (2015) stated:

Students in the standards-based classroom better understood that changing their own behavior would increase their understanding of the content and material (i.e., studying more and utilizing the opportunity for extra practice) and would increase their grade in the classroom, as compared to the students in the traditional classroom who likened their understanding of increasing compliance behaviors (i.e., increased effort, completing extra credit, and paying attention in class) to an increase in a grade in the class. (p. 111)

The findings from this study also suggested students exposed to standards-based grading outperformed students in traditional grading classes. According to Fink:

The students in the standards-based classroom in this study better demonstrate they know the content and skills of the curriculum aligned to the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards as compared to their peers in the traditional classroom due to their higher assessment average at the end of the semester. (p. 118)

The findings in Fink (2015) implied that providing students with grades based on standards might instill students' value of learning over grades. These data also suggested

that students graded by standards understand their score is based on academic understanding, not behaviors. According to Fink:

Students in the standards-based classroom perceive achievement and the learning process to be more important than the grades they have earned because they believe the academic achievement of students is measured by the progress itself and the student's strengths and weaknesses demonstrated through the semester. Students in the traditional classroom believe academic achievement is measured by the grade they received, which includes compliance behaviors such as completion of homework, effort, and participation. (p. 91)

Fink's work supported the notion that grading based on standards provides students with a perception that learning does not end after a grade is awarded. Fink stated, "Students in the standards-based classroom typically related their understanding of the purpose of grading to the learning process itself, whereas students in the traditional classroom attributed the purpose of grading as a mean to an end (i.e., grades, achieving goals, etc.)" (pp. 101-102).

Souter (2009) conducted a study to measure feedback and how it related to standards-based grading. In this study, the primary research question was, "To what degree does feedback in a standards-based classroom convey judgments about student performance in relationship to the learning standards?" (p. 3). The study involved observations and interviews of six teachers in grades three and four (Souter, p. 59). Study participants had been using standards to assess and grade students for over a year (Souter, p. 46). This study found that using standards when giving students feedback provided teachers with a new way to evaluate students. Souter stated, "In this case study,

standards-based grading provides one of the boundaries of the study and indeed, teachers indicate via their interviews that this grading format has changed how they provide students with feedback” (p. 85). Providing students with feedback based on standards can increase student learning. According to Souter, “Research indicates that altering grading from norm-referenced to standards-based can improve student achievement and motivation and one significant reason for this is because the giving of quality feedback is more aligned with standards-based practice” (p. 87). Teacher testimonials support the notion that feedback to students is more specific when it is based on standards. Teachers from this study also stated parents had a clearer understanding of what their children had mastered. According to Souter, “The teachers agreed that standards-based grading and reporting impacted the feedback they provided students” (p. 76). Limitations of this study included the lack of student perspective and the lack of quantitative data to correlate the use of quality research to student motivation and/or student achievement (Souter, p. 84).

Norton (2014) conducted a study comparing fourth- and fifth-grade K-PREP (Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress) standardized assessment scores for math and reading/language arts to the grades issued by teachers in a traditional grading format and standards-based grading format classrooms (p. 3). Norton’s sample size included 364 fourth-grade students and 354 fifth-grade students from six different elementary schools within the same district (p. 55). According to Norton, “Scores were returned to schools in August 2012; at that time, the scores from the school implementing standards-based grading were compared to the scores from the schools continuing to use traditional grading” (p. 51). In order to make parallel the two grading systems, “A numerical grade of 100 to 93 was used to represent distinguished, a grade of 92 to 85

represented proficient, a grade of 84 to 70 represented apprentice, and a grade below 70 represented novice” (p. 51). The value of standards-based assessment was to be determined through the comparison to standardized assessment data and teacher assigned grades.

According to Norton (2014), there was “no significant relationship difference between teacher-issued mathematics grades and performance on the K-PREP mathematics exams between the two types of grading” (p. 59). The grades issued by teachers aligned to the standardized assessment scores in math for both types of grading practices. However, Norton did report, “There is a statistically significant and stronger relationship between teacher-issued reading/language arts grades and K-PREP reading/language arts grades in the standards-based grading school” (p. 59). The standards-based grading classrooms’ grades more closely aligned to the standardized testing data in reading/language arts. Norton offered a potential explanation as to why that might be: “Math standards are generally taught in isolation while several reading/language arts standards may be integrated in a single lesson, so the assessment of math standards can lead to more efficient fixes in mathematics than in reading/language arts” (p. 64). In other words, mathematics by its nature lends itself to more targeted instruction to scaffold learners.

Norton (2014) proclaimed, “Teachers and administrators should continue to utilize standards-based grading because it measures student learning and eliminates non-academic measures; therefore, the resulting grade is a true indication of student learning” (p. 69). Additionally Norton stated schools should “continue to involve parents in the [standards-based grading] process. The school system would benefit from knowing

whether parents understand the new type of grading as well as the new standards-grading report card” (p. 69). Both of these recommendations are admirable; however, this study is open to criticism for its lack of clarity with respect to variables that could affect the findings. The use of standardized assessment data as a means of justifying the accuracy of grades brings about questions about grading practice consistency and validity. The assumptions left unresolved limit the value of this research.

SECTION FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

In order to determine the necessary steps for District 32 to successfully implement standards-based grading, I gathered and analyzed multiple data sources from multiple stakeholders. To gain a well-rounded perspective on this issue, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. These different types of data provided information that informed an effective change plan for implementing standards-based grading. According to Patton (2008):

The idea is that the greater the number of supporting sources for a “lesson learned,” the more rigorous the supporting evidence, and the greater the *triangulation of supporting resources*, the more confidence one has in the significance and meaningfulness of a lesson learned. (p. 136)

Utilizing a mixed method of data collection from multiple perspectives provided a rich understanding of this change process.

All District 32 teachers who provide grades to students were given a survey to gauge their perspective on elements of a standards-based mindset, understanding of standards-based grading, and components of effective assessment practice. Students who experienced a standards-based grading unit of instruction were given a survey to determine preferences between traditional letter grades and standards-based grades. Some of the teachers involved in the standards-based unit of instruction participated in a group interview that provide greater details about the value of standards-based grading and the requirements for a smooth transition to such a system.

All Teacher Survey

This survey was administered to the 173 teachers in District 32 who administer grades to students. Of those 173 teachers, 91 participated in this survey to provide their perceptions of the standards-based mindset and standards-based grading.

Table 4

Item 1: Students' academic success is accurately represented when teachers give feedback on performance related to learning standards.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	27	29.7%
Agree	53	58.2%
No opinion	2	2.2%
Disagree	7	7.7%
Strongly disagree	2	2.2%

The results of the first survey item indicated that teachers in District 32 believe that reporting student successes based on learning standards is a beneficial concept. This finding is supported by the standards-based mindset perspective described by Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O'Conner (2009), O'Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). For this item, the total combined-positive amount of "strongly agree" and "agree" responses was 87.9%. This number as compared to the less than 10% combined-negative total of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" suggests support for a change to standards-based grading in District 32. Some of the additional comments shared by teachers help reinforce this belief. One teacher commented, "I wish our report card more closely aligned with the standards." Other

responses that affiliated with this belief included, “I feel in our classrooms we keep track of our kids well using the standards, and can report to families where their child is academically. The current reporting system though, does not allow us to communicate this.” A third teacher shared, “Students know what standard they're working on, so when they receive feedback on that particular standard, they know where they are and where to go.” One comment that addressed the challenges related to this type of reporting stated, “With 70 students, it is hard to find the time to give the type of feedback they need on a regular basis.”

Table 5

Item 2: Student assessment methods should be flexible to represent what a student knows, understands, and can do.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	48	52.8%
Agree	39	42.9%
No opinion	1	1.1%
Disagree	3	3.3%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%

For item 2, the combined-positive response of “strongly agree” and “agree” totaled 95.7%. This overwhelming number suggests District 32 teachers highly favor providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their understandings. A minimal number of teachers disagreed with this item (only 3.3%), while zero teachers strongly disagreed with this concept.

Table 6

Item 3: The reporting of students' academic success might include behavioral performances such as conduct, attendance, promptness, etc.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	29	32.2%
Agree	35	38.9%
No opinion	4	4.4%
Disagree	16	17.8%
Strongly disagree	6	6.7%

This item was phrased in a manner that did not support a standards-based mindset. For this item the negative responses support thinking aligned with standards-based mindset, a major component of the work of Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O'Conner (2009), O'Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). For this item, the total combined-negative amount of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses registered 24.5%. The combined-positive responses of "agree" and "strongly agree" totaled 71.1%. These data suggest a majority of District 32 teachers do not see the value in reporting student behaviors separately from their academic performances. However, 8 out of the 12 additional comments suggest behavioral data should be reported separate from academic grades. One such teacher suggested, "[Behavioral performances] should be included on the report card, but in a separate section and not a part of the grades." Another teacher commented, "I think "[behavioral performance] is important to include in the report card. However, the academic grade and

the behavior grade need to be separate.” One teacher shared, “Many times these correlate with their final product.”

Table 7

Item 4: Zeros should be used when determining a student’s grade.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	6	6.7%
Agree	12	13.3%
No opinion	15	16.7%
Disagree	33	36.7%
Strongly disagree	24	26.7%

This item was also phrased in a manner that did not support a standards-based mindset as described by Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). For this item, the negative responses support thinking aligned with standards-based grading. The total combined-negative amount of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” responses amounted to 63.4%. Though this amount is a majority, it is not as high a number as other majority totals in this survey. Twenty percent of teachers supported the use of zeros in their grading practices. The additional 12 comments for this item provided greater details surrounding the conditions and reasons why District 32 teachers justified the use of zeros when they are grading students.

Seven of these additional responses supported the use of zeros when grading. Some of these comments such as, “A zero would represent work not done/completed/turned in,” and “Zero is for no work and no effort,” justified the use of

zeros when grading. Two teachers claimed zeros are a necessity for preparing students for life: “Only as a last resort if a student fails to complete work; they will never be given credit for not showing up in their real lives,” and “If we give credit for a student who does nothing the message we are sending is, it's OK to not go to work, you will still get 50% of your paycheck paid.” Several teachers provided additional comments that did not support the use of zeros in grading. One such teacher shared, “Ummm, no. Never,” while another teacher stated, “Not enough evidence to give feedback.” The number of “no opinions” for this item is the highest in this survey, which might indicate some teachers haven’t thought about the use of zeros in grading or can’t decide how they feel on this issue.

Table 8

Item 5: Assigning an “Incomplete” as a grade is a useful option for teachers until students provide evidence to demonstrate what they know, understand, or can do on a particular standard, skill, assessment, or activity.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	19	21.4%
Agree	56	62.3%
No opinion	7	7.9%
Disagree	7	7.9%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses for this item was 83.7%. A majority of District 32 teachers supported the idea of using

“incomplete” as a grading option as suggested by Guskey and Bailey (2010) and O’Conner (2011). Just fewer than 8% of teachers disagreed with this grading option. Additional comments from teachers suggest they see it as an alternative to assigning a zero in grading. One teacher stated, “I think that being able to assign an incomplete would help with the above issue [using zeros in grading].” Another teacher commented, “If there is not enough data a grade should not be given.” Other teachers supported the idea of using an incomplete in grading but cautioned, “‘Not yet’ might be a nice way to indicate that a student has not yet met the standard.” Other teachers provided alternate options for grading: “How about putting ‘not assessed yet’ or ‘developing,’” and “For that I would suggest ‘in progress’ not ‘incomplete.’” These comments suggest District 32 teachers are thinking about alternative ways of reporting student successes and challenges. One comment indicated a more skeptical perspective on the issue: “Only if the students are unaware and do not take advantage of this option.”

Table 9

Item 6: Students should be permitted to be re-assessed to demonstrate an accurate representation of what they know, understand, and can do.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	44	49.4%
Agree	44	49.4%
No opinion	1	1%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%

The response to students being reassessed had the single most supportive alignment to the standards-based mindset as described in the work of Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses registered 98.8%. The fact that there was no disagreement with this issue suggests District 32 teachers might already be implementing reassessment when grading students. Additional comments such as, “Yes, after continued work on that skill,” suggest a need for some type of work by the student between assessment opportunities. Another teacher mentioned additional work between assessments and restrictions to the reassessments by stating, “There should be limitations so they give their best each time. They should have to earn the attempt to get a higher mark via remediation.” One teacher indicated that full reassessment should occur “but not for the same value.”

Table 10

Item 7: Teachers should arrive at a final grade by averaging performance grades over the designated period of time.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	7	7.9%
Agree	31	34.9%
No opinion	15	16.9%
Disagree	29	32.6%
Strongly disagree	7	7.9%

This item, like some listed previously, was phrased in a manner that does not support a standards-based mindset described by Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). The spread on the response to this item was almost perfectly distributed between positive and negative perceptions. The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses was 42.8% while the combined-negative “disagree” and “strongly disagree” totaled 40.5%. The “no opinion” response of 16.9% was an elevated neutral amount. Numerous teachers provided additional comments that suggest averaging student scores is not the best option for grading. One such teacher shared, “I think students should be graded on how much they improve vs. averaging grades,” while another teacher stated, “Final grades should reflect what students can do—not their attempts to achieve that goal.” Another teacher who didn’t support averaging grades stated:

I think it all depends on the latest assessment of the standard. If they received a “2” for standard RL2 [CCSS Reading Literature Second Grade] and then later in

the trimester received a “3,” the student should receive a score of secure [3] on his or her report card.

One teacher depicted this practice as challenging within the confines of traditional grading parameters: “This is tricky. Until a method other than the traditional 'grades' is utilized, then there isn't really a different way to determine an overall grade for the designated period of time.” One teacher stated, “I think this depends on the standard.”

Table 11

Item 8: Teachers should accept late work without reducing points for the assignments.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	5	5.5%
Agree	39	42.9%
No opinion	14	15.4%
Disagree	29	31.9%
Strongly disagree	4	4.4%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses for accepting late work without a reduction in points was 48.4%. The combined-negative “disagree” and “strongly disagree” total for item 8 was 36.3%, a formidable quantity of dissenters. This item produced an elevated number of no opinion responses, 15.4%. Several of these comments suggest support for accepting late work not penalized. One teacher referenced such data appearing in the behavioral area of a report card: “I agree if there is a separate work completion grade.” This belief in an expanded format report card is supported by the work of Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015).

Another teacher commented, “I agree late work should be accepted, but we need to keep in mind why the assignment was turned in late. What circumstances prevented those assignments to be completed? I do not agree with the reducing of points.” One teacher stated, “However it should be noted if many assignments are late, as this is important in the future workplace.” Teachers shared contrary views too. One teacher stated:

I do this, but I don't necessarily agree with it. Again, if we are preparing students for college and career readiness, there are strict deadlines in those worlds. Not everyone gives people 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc...chances to get work done.

Another teacher expressed opposition to this concept: “There should be some consequences such as few points as possible.”

Table 12

Item 9: Teachers should provide students with rubrics and work exemplars prior to independent work.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	46	50.6%
Agree	43	47.3%
No opinion	2	2.2%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%

The implementation of rubrics and exemplars in instruction and assessment produced very favorable reactions from District 32 teachers. The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses for this item was 97.9%. Not one teacher disagreed or strongly disagreed with this concept. However, even with no level of

disagreement, one teacher's additional comment suggested some level of trepidation: "To some degree...at some point, students should be the judge of what should be included in an assignment."

Table 13

Item 10: Students' self-assessment and goal setting should be a part of the assessment process.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	29	31.9%
Agree	49	53.9%
No opinion	7	7.7%
Disagree	5	5.5%
Strongly disagree	1	1.1%

Most District 32 teachers believe the use of student self-assessment and goal setting is a good idea. The work of O'Connor (2009) supports this type of thinking. The total combined-positive amount of "strongly agree" and "agree" responses registered 85.8%. The combined-negative amount of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" was 6.6%. One teacher's additional comment was, "Self-assessment and goal setting should be a part for students and taken into consideration when assessing." Another teacher stated, "I agree, but I don't think it should be in their 'final grade.'" Two teachers who expressed doubts regarding this concept shared, "Not all students will truly give themselves the grade they deserve," and "Oftentimes what they think they can do and what they can actually do are two very different things."

Table 14

Item 11: Performance in group-work should be included in a student's grade.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	8	8.8%
Agree	49	53.9%
No opinion	11	12.1%
Disagree	19	20.9%
Strongly disagree	4	4.4%

This item like others before it is phrased in a manner that did not support a standards-based mindset described in the work of Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O'Conner (2009), O'Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). For this item the negative responses supported thinking aligned with standards-based grading. The total combined-positive amount of "strongly agree" and "agree" responses registered 62.7%, which suggests a majority of District 32 teachers' beliefs are not fully aligned to elements of the standards-based mindset. The combined-negative response that supports the standards-based mindset totaled only 25.3%. One of the teachers' additional comments suggested group work be reported in an area other than a student's academic grade: "This should fall into the performance category and not the standard being assessed." Some of the teachers' comments suggested they don't feel this practice is sound. One teacher stated, "Many students are unable to function effectively in groups; to grade them on this is unfair," and another teacher shared, "I am still conflicted in this area. It is hard to grade students for group work when all students don't have the same work ethic or ability level. How do you account for that in a group grade?" Some

teachers expressed that certain elements of group work could be included in a grade: “The group grade should not be held accountable but perhaps their participation, teamwork, etc.” Other teachers expressed the importance of group work as it relates to the world that awaits students beyond school: “When you have a job you must work in a team,” and “It is an important life skill to be able to work well in groups.”

Table 15

Item 12: Homework should be included in a student's grade.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	5	5.5%
Agree	35	38.5%
No opinion	14	15.4%
Disagree	22	24.2%
Strongly disagree	15	16.5%

This item was phrased in a manner that did not support a standards-based mindset described by Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). For this item the negative responses supported thinking aligned with a standards-based mindset. The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses registered 44%. The combination of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” responses suggesting homework should not be included in grade determination was 40.7%. This even distribution of opinions implies a significant difference in teachers’ opinions on the justification of homework in grade determination. The 15.4% total of “no opinion” responses suggest numerous District 32 teachers are uncertain regarding this topic. Five out of the 14

additional comments from teachers supported homework not being a part of grading. One teacher stated, “Homework is practice. The only thing that matters is the learning that comes from the practice.” An additional such comment was, “I often refer to homework as ‘Home Learning’ since I believe that is a more accurate representation of what I am asking students to do.” Another teacher shared, “Homework should be used as formative assessment, NOT as a final grade.” Other teacher opinions included, “It depends on the assignment,” and “In the upper grades I agree. In the lower grades I feel that no.” One teacher related homework completion to preparation for the future:

Again, at a certain age they need accountability. They will have to be responsible in the real world, however, it should not be a large portion of the grade and make-ups and late assignments should be allowed with minor penalty.

One teacher summed up the complexity of this issue: “Again, conflicted because there are students who will always do their homework but may not truly understand it. Then there are students who are able to show secure mastery on an assessment and never do a piece of homework.”

Table 16

Item 13: Non-academic extra credit (e.g., bringing in can goods for food drive, attending a school function) should not be calculated into a student's grade.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	42	46.7%
Agree	30	33.4%
No opinion	8	8.9%
Disagree	7	7.8%
Strongly disagree	3	3.4%

For item 13, the total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses was 80.1%. This thinking aligns with the work of O’Connor (2009) and O’Connor (2011). The combined-negative amount of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 11.2%. One teacher’s additional comment declared, “NO EXTRA CREDIT! Ever,” while another teacher stated, “I think students should be acknowledged for this type of commitment, but not in grading.” A different perspective was expressed by another teacher who shared, “In the older grades I somewhat agree.” This comment implies this practice is acceptable in lower grades.

The next eight items requested participants’ views on the perceived benefits of standards-based grading and traditional grading practices, with stakeholders and learning. Items 14, 16, 18, and 20 were phrased in a manner that supported the traditional grading practices in District 32, which involves the use of a single letter grade per subject. Items 15, 17, 19, and 21 were phrased in a manner that supported standards-based grading practices.

Table 17

Item 14: The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement is effective and informative for all stakeholders.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	1	1.2%
Agree	15	17.2%
No opinion	11	12.6%
Disagree	37	42.3%
Strongly disagree	23	26.4%

In item 14, the total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses supporting the current traditional method of grading was 18.4%. The combined-negative amount of responses that did not support the current traditional method of grading in item 14 was 68.7%. One teacher’s additional comment that supported the implementation of standards-based grading was simply, “I believe we need standards-based grading.” One teacher who recognized both the value of standards-based grading as well as parents’ unfamiliarity with it suggested, “Parents relate to letter grades but letter grades do not reflect individual standards students are being ‘graded’ on.” A comment skeptical of the implementation of standards-based grading stated, “[Letter grading] is the only system most parents recognize and high schools and colleges will continue to use it probably forever.

Table 18

Item 15: Reporting student achievement by learning standards is effective and informative for all stakeholders.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	19	21.8%
Agree	56	64.4%
No opinion	6	6.9%
Disagree	6	6.9%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%

In item 15, the total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that support standards-based mindset was 86.2% which is supported by the work of Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). The total combined-negative amount of responses, which did not support standards-based grading in item 15 was 6.9%. Teachers’ additional comments from item 15 suggest some teachers view standards-based grading as a more beneficial method for reporting student success. One teacher’s comments supporting this perspective included, “[Standards-based grading] makes it more explicit to students and parents where the areas of achievement/strengths are and where there are areas of growth.” One teacher addressed the need to explain this new method of grading by stating, “I think that this will be a change for parents, but more informative.” Some teachers expressed the opposite view and felt standards-based grading might be too challenging for parents. One such teacher said, “Parents do not have the theoretical background to process information.”

Table 19

Item 16: The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement provides students with accurate feedback to increase their learning.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	1	1.6%
Agree	14	16.1%
No opinion	7	8.1%
Disagree	41	47.1%
Strongly disagree	24	27.6%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported the current traditional method of grading in item 16 was 24.6%. The combined-negative amount of responses that did not support the current traditional method of grading in item 16 was 74.7%. One comment supporting a change to standards-based grading said, “More than a letter needs to be provided for feedback. A letter grade means nothing. It's not meaningful feedback.” A similar remark supporting standards-based grading included, “It just lets them know how many points they earned, not necessarily why they earned them.” One teacher voiced a mixed opinion with the comment, “Yes and no. It should be broken down more so they can see where they are receiving an A and where they need to improve.”

Table 20

Item 17: Reporting student achievement by learning standards provides accurate feedback to students to increase their learning.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	20	23.0%
Agree	58	66.7%
No opinion	2	2.3%
Disagree	6	6.9%
Strongly disagree	1	1.2%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported standards-based grading in item 17 was 89.7%. The total combined-negative amount of responses that did not support standards-based grading in item 17 was 8.1%. One additional comment by a teacher supported using standards-based grading:

Students will have a learning curve where they will need to be taught how to accurately interpret standards to then understand where they are at, but in the long-term outlook, this is the most beneficial way for students to see how they are performing.

Table 21

Item 18: The current letter grade method for reporting student successes provides parents with accurate feedback regarding what a student knows, understands, and can do.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	1	1.5%
Agree	16	18.7%
No opinion	9	10.5%
Disagree	40	46.5%
Strongly disagree	20	23.3

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported the current traditional method of grading in item 18 was 20.2%. The combined-negative amount of responses that did not support the current traditional method of grading in item 18 was 69.8%. One teacher’s additional comment suggested work must be done to make standards-based grading valuable: “Accurate in a parents mind, ‘yes;’ however not necessarily. This area needs to be redefined to make it more accurate.” One other comment suggests that perhaps the traditional method of grading has value because it is, “Imperfect, but comprehensible.”

Table 22

Item 19: Reporting student successes by learning standards provides parents with accurate feedback regarding what a student knows, understands, and can do.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	23	26.7%
Agree	54	62.8%
No opinion	4	4.7%
Disagree	5	5.8%
Strongly disagree	0	00.0%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported standards-based grading in item 19 was 89.5%. The total combined-negative amount of responses that did not support standards-based grading in item 19 was 5.8%. One teacher who shared an additional comment that supported the use of standards-based grading stated, “There will be a learning curve in which parents will need to be taught how exactly standards work, but in the long run it is more beneficial information for them regarding their student.” These findings are particularly in line with the work of Guskey (2002). More cautious responses regarding parents and standards-based grading included, “Parents need to be educated or it will not be a valuable tool,” and “Not enough understanding by parents.”

Table 23

Item 20: The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement gives teachers the opportunity to direct further instruction.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	1	1.2%
Agree	21	24.1%
No opinion	12	13.8%
Disagree	38	43.7%
Strongly disagree	15	17.2%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported the current traditional method of grading in item 20 was 25.3%. The combined-negative amount of responses that did not support the current traditional method of grading in item 20 was 60.9%. One additional comment for item 20 stated, “I look at the standards I am teaching and where the student’s mastery level is, this directs my instruction.” Another teacher commented, “Since the teachers are aware of their students’ level of understanding, they are able to direct further instruction,” This type of response suggests some teachers believe our traditional letter grade method for evaluating students already helps inform their instruction.

Table 24

Item 21: Reporting student achievement by learning standards gives teachers the opportunity to direct further instruction.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	23	26.4%
Agree	58	66.7%
No opinion	3	3.5%
Disagree	2	2.3%
Strongly disagree	1	1.2%

The total combined-positive amount of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses that supported standards-based grading in item 21 was 93.1%. The total combined-negative amount of responses that did not support standards-based grading in question 21 was 3.5%. An additional teacher comment that supported the use of standards-based grading included, “This will be easier for teachers to see where extra support [*sic*] student learning is needed.”

Table 25

Item 22a: My understanding of the Common Core State Standards is _____.

Answer choice	N	%
High	57	66.3%
Medium	26	30.2%
Low	3	3.5%

A significant number of District 32 teachers reported having an elevated level of understanding of the Common Core State Standards, twice as much as the combined total of those teachers who reported a medium and low understanding.

Table 26

Item 22b: My understanding of the use of formative assessment is _____.

Answer choice	N	%
High	63	73.3%
Medium	22	25.6%
Low	0	0%

An even greater number of teachers stated a high understanding of the use of formative assessment. The amount of teachers stating a high understanding of formative assessment was three times that of the number of teachers reporting a medium level of understanding. Zero teachers reported a low understanding of use of formative assessment.

Table 27

Item 22c: My understanding of standards-based grading is _____.

Answer choice	N	%
High	26	30.2%
Medium	53	61.6%
Low	7	8.1%

District 32 teachers reported their understanding of standards-based grading to be predominately at the medium level. Half as many teachers reported a high level of understanding of standards-based grading as reported a medium understanding. Fewer than 10% of teachers reported a low understanding of standards-based grading.

Table 28

Item 22d: My understanding of how to implement standards-based grading is _____.

Answer choice	N	%
High	12	14.3%
Medium	54	64.3%
Low	18	21.4%

More teachers claimed to have a high understanding of the concept of standards-based grading than the implementation of standards-based grading. Close to three times as many teachers stated a low level of understanding of how to implement standards-based grading as compared to an understanding the concept of standards-based grading. Half as many teachers reported a high level of understanding the implementation of

standards-based grading as opposed to a high level of understanding the concept of standards-based grading.

Table 29

Item 22e: My understanding of standardized, norm-referenced, and criterion-referenced assessments is _____.

Answer choice	N	%
High	16	18.6%
Medium	52	60.5%
Low	18	20.9%

A majority of participating teachers reported a medium level understanding of standardized, norm-referenced, and criterion-referenced assessments. The high levels and low levels of understanding were almost equal at approximately 20% of participants each.

All Teacher Survey Summary

The survey administered to all teachers regarding standards-based grading yielded results that can help benefit a change in grading practices. The survey summaries are presented in three categories: standards-based mindset, grading practice benefits, and foundations of assessment.

Standards-Based Mindset

Items 1 through 13 of the all-teacher survey involved elements of a standards-based mindset described by Schimmer (2016), Guskey and Bailey (2010), O’Conner (2009), O’Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). According to Schimmer (2013), “Before we can fully implement standards-based

reporting we need to develop a new way of thinking about grading; we need a standards-based mindset.” All items were phrased in a manner that supported a standards-based mindset with the exception of items 3, 4, 7, 11, and 12. The following suggestions can be drawn from survey items:

- District 32 teachers believe academic success is most accurately represented when teachers give feedback on performance related to learning standards.
- District 32 teachers believe assessment methods should be flexible to represent what a student knows, understands, and can do.
- District 32 teachers find value in certain elements of the standards-based mindset but do not find value in others.
- District 32 teachers support the reassessment of students when competency is not demonstrated.
- District 32 teachers support the use of rubrics and exemplars in learning.

Grading Practice Benefits

- District 32 teachers support the use of learning standards for reporting student achievement.
- District 32 teachers support reporting student achievement by learning standards to provide accurate feedback for all stakeholders.

Foundations of Assessment

- District 32 teachers report a high level of understanding of the CCSS and the use of formative assessment.

- District 32 teachers report a medium level of understanding of standards-based grading, the implementation of standards-based grading, and the different types of standardized assessments.

Student Survey

The following survey was administered to 54 students in fourth grade, sixth grade, and seventh grade. This survey probed students' perceptions of traditional grading practices versus standards-based grading practices.

Table 30

Item 1: Getting a letter grade such as A, B, C, D, or F can give me information to know if I've learned something.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	5	9.3%
Agree	30	55.6%
No opinion	6	11.1%
Disagree	10	18.5%
Strongly disagree	3	5.6%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” for this item was 64.9%. This figure suggests that more than a majority of respondents believed that traditional grading practices are informative for students. Close to one quarter of the responses indicated this method is not effective for reporting learning for students. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” registered 24.1% of the participants.

Table 31

Item 2: Getting a score based on a learning standard can give me information to know if I've learned something.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	21	39.6%
Agree	19	35.9%
No opinion	8	15.1%
Disagree	4	7.6%
Strongly disagree	1	1.9%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” was 75.5%. This item suggests students in District 32 believe elements of standards-based grading provide students with accurate feedback regarding their learning. A comparison between items 1 and 2 in the student survey shows five more students or 10.6% of the respondents endorsed standards-based grading over traditional grading when it came to students knowing if they have learned something based on the method of grading used. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” totaled 9.5% for item 2, 14.6% less than reported in item 1 for the reverse perspective.

Table 32

Item 3: Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F can give me information so I know where I am stronger and where I need more work as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	17	31.5%
Agree	22	40.8%
No opinion	3	5.6%
Disagree	12	22.2%
Strongly disagree	0	00.0%

This item shows a combined-positive total of 72.3% for “agree” and “strongly agree” responses, a formidable amount of student support. The counter perspective amounted to a combined-negative total of 22.2% for “disagree” and “strongly disagree” responses.

Table 33

Item 4: Getting a score based on a learning standard can give me information so I know where I am stronger and where I need more work as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	11	20.4%
Agree	33	61.1%
No opinion	6	11.1%
Disagree	3	5.6%
Strongly disagree	1	1.9%

Item 4 produced a combined-positive response of 81.5% for “agree” and “strongly agree.” This figure of 81.5% was the highest combined-positive response on the survey. Like with items 1 and 2, though the level of support for a traditional grading perspective is high, it is even higher for the standards-based grading viewpoint. Five fewer students or 9.2% of the respondents endorsed standards-based grading over traditional grading when it came to students knowing their strengths and deficiencies. The combined-negative responses of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” for item 4 totaled 7.5%. This is 14.7% less than those who disagreed with traditional grading practices in the previous item.

Table 34

Item 5: Getting a letter grade such as A, B, C, D, or F can make me want to try hard and continue to learn.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	19	35.2%
Agree	24	44.4%
No opinion	6	11.1%
Disagree	4	7.4%
Strongly disagree	1	1.9%

The combined-positive responses of “agree” and “strongly agree” totaled 79.6%. This item registered the highest “strongly agree” response on the survey. This type of response suggests that a significant amount of District 32 students who participated in this survey see traditional letter grades as motivational tools that increase their drive to learn. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 9.3%.

Table 35

Item 6: Getting a score based on a learning standard can make me want to try hard and continue to learn.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	15	28.3%
Agree	28	52.9%
No opinion	6	11.3%
Disagree	4	7.6%
Strongly disagree	0	00.0%

For this item, the combined-positive total of “agree” and “strongly agree” responses were 81.2%, only 1.6% more than the responses supporting traditional grading practices. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” answers was 7.2%, 2.1% less than the dissention response for traditional grading practices with respect to student motivation and grading.

Table 36

Item 7: Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F can make me feel good about myself as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	18	33.3%
Agree	23	42.6%
No opinion	5	9.3%
Disagree	6	11.1%
Strongly disagree	2	3.7%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” for this item was 75.9%. This was the first item in this survey to produce a higher combined-positive response for the traditional grading perspective. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” for this item was 14.8%.

Table 37

Item 8: Getting a score based on a learning standard can make me feel good about myself as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	9	16.7%
Agree	30	55.6%
No opinion	8	14.8%
Disagree	5	9.3%
Strongly disagree	2	3.7%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” for this item was 72.3%. The difference between the standards-based grading perspective of item 8 and the traditional grading perspective of item 7 was 3.6% or the responses of two students. The combined-negative responses of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 13.0%, which was 1.8% (one student) less than item 7. This suggests District 32 students believe that traditional grading practices have a bigger impact on making them feel good about themselves as learners.

Table 38

Item 9: Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F can make me feel bad about myself as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	5	9.3%
Agree	14	25.9%
No opinion	10	18.5%
Disagree	17	31.5%
Strongly disagree	8	14.8%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” for item 9 was 35.2%. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 46.3% with the highest number of selections for the latter in this survey. Additionally, item 9 gathered the highest combined-negative total in the survey. These two findings suggest District 32 students make less of a negative emotional connection with traditional grades compared to standards-based grades. This item also produced the highest “no opinion” response in this survey with 18.5% of participants choosing the neutral option. This suggests 10 of the students were not able to formulate a link between traditional grading practices and if such grades could make them feel bad about themselves as learners.

Table 39

Item 10: Getting a score based on a learning standard can make me feel bad about myself as a learner.

Answer choice	N	%
Strongly agree	4	7.8%
Agree	16	31.3%
No opinion	9	17.7%
Disagree	18	35.3%
Strongly disagree	4	7.8%

The combined-positive response of “agree” and “strongly agree” for item 10 was 39.1%. This amount was a 3.9% difference (equivalent to one student) who felt standards-based grading makes students feel bad about themselves as learners. The combined-negative response of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” was 43.1%, 3.2% less than that for the standards-based perspective in item 9. This result stemmed from three more student responses registered than for the traditional letter grading practices. The “no opinion” response for this item was second-highest amount (17.7%) on the survey. This item suggests District 32 students might make slightly less of a negative emotional connection with traditional grades and their capacity to make them feel bad about themselves as learners.

Table 40

Item 11: It helps my learning to be graded

Answer choice	N	%
With a letter grade	31	57.4%
With a score based on a learning standard	23	42.6%

Item 11 asked students if a traditional grading or a standards-based grading method helped them learn. Eight more students stated traditional grading practices helped them learn over the standards-based grading option, a difference of 14.8%. This is by far the largest spread between support for either form of grading practice throughout the survey.

Table 41

Item 12: What grade are you in?

Answer choice	N	%
Fourth grade	25	46.3%
Sixth grade	8	14.8%
Seventh grade	21	38.9%

Student Survey Summary

The survey was administered to 54 students in fourth, sixth, and seventh grade and measured their perceptions regarding standards-based grading. Results suggest how students might view a change in grading practices. The following suggestions can be drawn from these items.

- District 32 students support the use of standards-based grading over traditional grading practices by a small margin when the question focuses on what they “know” about their learning.
- District 32 students support the use of traditional grading practices over standards-based grading by a small margin when the question focuses on what they “feel” about their learning.
- District 32 students support the use of traditional grading practices over standards-based grading when asked which grading practice helps them as a learner.

There are limitations to these data regarding the perceptions of District 32 students and standards-based grading. The first limitation involves the sample size. This limited sample size may not reveal the true beliefs of how standards-based grades are perceived by all students in District 32. Another limitation is that data were collected primarily for the subject of math, with the exception of the one sixth-grade class in the study. The content subject for which the data were collected could skew perceptions regarding standards-based grading overall. A final limitation to these data include a lack of differentiation in the survey between the grade levels accurately addressing differing levels of cognition and development with the students perceptions regarding standards-based grading.

Teacher Group Interview

Four District 32 teachers were interviewed for 45 minutes regarding their perceptions of implementing an approximately four-week standards-based instructional unit. Teachers were instructed not to use, reference, or acknowledge any traditional

grading practices including the use of percentage scores during the four-week standards-based instructional unit. Teachers were not provided questions in advance to the interview and their participation was solely voluntary.

Teacher Interview Participants

Teachers who participated in the group interview taught a standards-based instructional unit of math at the fourth and seventh grade levels. The following table reflects the teachers involved in the group interview:

Table 42

Teacher Interview Participants

Teacher	School	Subject	Years experience in D32	Total years experience
Teacher 1	Prairie	7 th grade math	26	27
Teacher 2	Williams	4 th grade	7	7
Teacher 3	Prairie	7 th grade math	2	11
Teacher 4	Williams	4 th grade	3	6

Teacher Interview Themes

The standards-based math instructional unit that these teachers implemented with their students lasted approximately four weeks. The following four themes emerged from the group interview with two fourth- and two seventh-grade teachers.

- Theme 1: Some students experienced an increase in accountability toward their learning when exposed to standards-based grading.
- Theme 2: Some students experienced an increase in motivation for their learning when exposed to standards-based grading.

- Theme 3: Some parents valued standards-based feedback about their child's progress.
- Theme 4: Instruction that adheres to a standards-based mindset prepares students for the future.
- Theme 5: District 32's standards-based instructional units and assessments support the change to standards-based grading.

Theme 1: Some Students Experienced an Increase in Accountability

Teachers who provided the standards-based instructional unit expressed that students who were permitted to retake tests may have demonstrated an increase in accountability toward their own learning. Teachers in this interview expressed varying methods for allowing students to be reassessed or redo assignments and tests.

Researcher: It sounds like when you allowed for retesting, there was a change in student accountability with what they were learning? Would you say that's a true statement?

Teacher 2: Absolutely.

Teacher 1: I think, for some, it's kind of a shock. Maybe that's too strong of a word, but they can redo a test, they can redo a section. "You haven't learned this, are you ready to learn it?" When they do, you can see that "Oh now I get it. Here is what my mistake was, and now I know what to do." And those who take advantage of it—some are a little timid with it though, they...

Teacher 2: One hundred percent, I agree.

Teacher 1: It's only been a short period of time that we've been doing it, so there's still some reeducating in a way.

Teacher 2: They're figuring it out.

These teachers reported their students see the value in being offered the opportunity to be retested. This assessment practice allows students to focus on areas in

which they have proven themselves secure. Later in this interview, a fourth-grade teacher expanded on how the concept of retesting has benefitted her students.

Teacher 2: I have six kids not retaking *anything* tomorrow. That wasn't the case the first time, every single kid retook. Now, this time, I have definitely kids who didn't do as well the first test. Well now they're going, "I only have to retake two, how awesome is that?" I'm seeing their understanding; they're teaching themselves how to restudy and it's awesome. And they see how they did this on this standard, they didn't subtract correctly, so they're coaching themselves.

Theme 2: Some Students Experienced an Increase in Motivation

Teachers of the standards-based instructional unit provided feedback to students based on units. This type of feedback presented students with multiple points of information based on the standards being taught. Teachers reported some students' motivation toward their learning increased due to this type of feedback.

Teacher 2: I feel like a lot of times, even me being in school, it's either right or wrong. It's not looking at the nitty gritty. "What actually did you get wrong?" I think that's nice for our students to see. I've seen, "Oh I got this one part wrong—I didn't get the whole thing wrong."

Researcher: It sounds like there was some increased motivation?

Teacher 2: Definitely.

Follow-up conversations pursued the quantity of students that experienced an increase in motivation due to the change in grading practice. Teachers discussed the value of retesting and use of test corrections for their students and how the use of percentages in grades affected perceptions of students and their learning.

Researcher: I'm gathering from what you're saying that there was some increased motivation for *certain* students?

Teacher 3: I didn't give them percentages at all this time. Last time I put a percent, last time I was like, "This is what you got with corrections" and they're like, "Oh now I'm done." They finished, that was the one thing. They thought they were done. Once I gave them that percentage, they were

done. Now they look at them like, "I've still got a 2 on that and what do I need to do? I need to fix it, to get a 3."

Researcher: So that's a change?

Teacher 3: That is definitely a change. They don't feel they're ever done 'til they feel good about those standards. It's good that they want to get a 4, because I'm like, "Well you're still not there but you're secure." And they just want to get that 4 but I'm like you're really not going to get a 4 until I retest you on the next unit—I see you do it totally on your own. It's okay to be at a 3, it's not going to be an automatic given you're going to be a 4. It's a whole different level.

When teachers were asked how widespread this increased accountability was with their students, one seventh-grade teacher elaborated further.

Teacher 1: I'm thinking it depends on the student. I think in a way it's nice for them to see the sections come back and some sections they have seen improvement. They didn't necessarily see where they were showing growth or strength and I think there seems to be more of a relief. There doesn't seem to be that fear of "Oh God they're handing the test back" it's more like "What did I do?" Not even a test...could be any assignment. I don't know if it's just a general feeling. I don't feel any negativity about it. It's kind of like they accepted it.

The retesting of only specific standards that require additional work can alleviate stress for some students as it redirects the purpose of the assessment from finality to continuity. Because of this shift, some students' attitudes about testing have shifted as well, increasing accountability for learning in some students.

Teacher 2: I haven't had one kid be like, "I am just happy with that one. I'm just going to take that, I'm not going to retest" because it's a choice and I give them that choice. I would say my entire class is excited to do better and they want to do better.

Teacher 1: They are seeing some success I think, and I don't see the sad faces the same way as when they get a grade that might have a...I hate to write a D or an F on the paper, so I used to do percentages and just write the percentages maybe...

Researcher: When you give a student a number or level? Is that not as upsetting?

Teacher 1: For some reason I think that they are not comparing themselves to one another. It's based on how they've improved or not and most kids are going to show improvement no matter what. They may just not be at the level that I want. Some kids may go from a 1 to a 2, they still show improvement but they're not seeing... "I'm still at a D, I'm still at a C."

Theme 3: Some Parents Valued Standards-Based Feedback about Their Child

The teachers in this interview shared that some of the feedback they received from parents regarding standards-based grades was favorable. However, some teachers believe student inquiries about traditional grades during this trial instructional unit might have come from parents. When teachers were asked to express any changes they might have noticed with their students when students received standards-based grades, the teachers shared the following.

Teacher 3: This is the first week anybody had ever asked me, "So what's my current grade?"

Teacher 1: I think the student that had asked me about it—I've had two that had asked me—I get the feeling it wasn't coming from them as much as it was coming from home. "What is your grade in math? What are you getting in math?" Just, the way that it was asked, I don't know.

One teacher shared her experience with talking to parents about the concept of students being offered the opportunity to be reassessed on the same standards. The teacher expressed to parents that retesting was a new option in their instruction.

Teacher 2: So [retesting] kind of puts it into their hands. It's not just a number and I think that that has really helped. The parents have commented on it because we have to have them bring home the test. The parents sign the prepping sheet, and so the parents get to see everything on there and that's something new with these fourth graders, they've never had that in the younger grades. We've gotten awesome feedback from the parents.

Theme 4: Standards-Based Mindset Instruction Can Prepare Students for the Real World

- Researcher: How would you respond to the people that might say that students are not going to get *that* opportunity in the real world, that we are not preparing students for what they might be seeing in the real world?
- Teacher 1: I'm preparing them for the next level of their learning. I'm preparing them, I need to have them learn the seventh-grade math so they can get to their eighth-grade math. If I just let something go, they don't learn it because they didn't have it learned by October 31, too bad so sad. Good luck in eighth-grade. That's not fair to the kid. I'm not going to stretch things out, if you didn't learn the first lesson by May, but I'm going to keep at it so I can get some improvement from them, hopefully. They're 12, mine are 12. They're not in the real world yet; they're in school. School is not necessarily the real world, and it's not only *my* responsibility to prepare them for the real world. They have parents and relatives and friends and families to help them with that too. So from my point of view as the teacher, I have a responsibility to teach them these standards, some behaviors of course, and I'll do my best to get them to the next level, not necessarily ready for a job when they're 20.
- Teacher 2: I mean, it's got to get them in the mindset, you made a mistake, it's okay you can retake it. Now when you go to college or high school, and you're failing classes, you learn the hard way, you have to retake it. This is like, getting them ready, slowly, to know that it's okay for you to take longer to learn something but we want you to keep going. Don't just be like, "I don't get it, I'm done." It's a negative mindset, we're giving them that positive, "you can take it again." That's why they're like, "what do you mean, we can take it again? I can change these answers on this test to study for..." Yeah! And they're like, "what?" It's almost been this negative way of "you didn't learn it, we're done." We're getting them ready.
- Teacher 1: And that backfires sometimes, if the students who might have difficulty learning, "Why even try if I'm not going to be successful?" I never really feel taken advantage of. I never feel like a student is like, "I'm going to take it again anyway, why even bother the first time." I don't feel that. They need that second chance. They are still learning and the other end of that is then they learn that if I study, and I practice I can do better maybe the next time they will study a little more before. I don't know if that answer satisfies people out in the world that are preparing kids for the real world. Not that we're not but that's where I had to come to peace with it.
- Teacher 4: I agree with what you were saying. I think these are the things we are supposed to be teaching the kids, and we need to teach them those things before they go and that's probably why we get kids in high school who

can't read and can't add because they didn't learn those standards when they were younger.

Theme 5: District 32's Instructional Units and Assessments Support the Change to Standards-Based Grading

Researcher: Do you think our current units and assessments lend themselves to this kind of shift or do you think there is a sizable amount of work to do? You can speak to ELA as well as math.

Teacher 2: And science. I think this would be really easy...because we've built these units on the standards.

Teacher 1: It's a lot of work to put it together and it's a different kind of grading, scoring.

Teacher 3: But there has got to be something more out there designed for what we need because it's very overwhelming and every little piece, every little section, every little comment, every little feedback. It's too much to keep straight sometimes, there's got to be a better way to record this and keep track of it.

Teacher 3: We have to be accountable to the parent when they say "Why are they at a 3?"

Researcher: So, data collection was the biggest challenge?

Teacher 1: I think the mindset...we're moving in that direction. Even if people are just saying it, it's been a big shift for people to move from giving zeros to giving second chances and a deadline is kind of a soft deadline a lot of time anymore with students. We've come a long way as a staff in that direction. I think you're going to find pockets that, it's going to be very difficult for them, for people to do... I think that teachers who've been using standard-based grading, like teachers who have taught summer school and they use it, I think once they see what it is, and you can learn to manage it differently for yourself, I think they see the benefit in it. How much...it's not easier, I need a word. Not easier to assign or talk about or assess how well a student is doing, better than just putting a grade on it. Those that I talk to who are using the standards, are keeping the data. It can be monstrous.

Teacher 3: Because I can't do it all in my memory.

Teacher 2: We'd have to create something like looking at a summative and being like, these three summatives are getting at standard seven so here's a

spreadsheet, but that's the only way to do it. You would just have to say, with this summative, which is getting at this standard... did they look at the score? And you check it off. And that's the only way I think you can do it, which I think is manageable just because our curriculum is so based on the standard. It would be like, for week seven, eight, nine, 10, we're just focusing on standard seven so at the end of week 10 we give the summative and then we see where they're at with formatives along the way.

Teacher 1: They have a lot less students than we do.

Teacher 2: Right but that's what I'm saying. We have science and social studies and math and reading and writing, so we have all those subjects, it's just different I think. Using the standards and how our curriculum is based on the standards, would this be something that's doable? Yes. Start small.

Teacher 1: Yeah, start small. One unit, one class. One unit, two classes for now.

Teacher 3: Tell the kids you're going to try it.

Teacher 1: Be open to feedback.

Researcher: What about advice for administration or leadership in what a teacher would need in order to make this smooth?

Teacher 1: I think the parent aspect has to be addressed right away, because we will hear from parents one way or the other, positive or negative, or we won't hear but parents will be talking and eventually we will hear about the parents talking and it comes back. Teachers right away feel a pressure towards their evaluation so they probably need to be reassured that you're doing your job; you're doing fine. We want you to try this. We're doing this; we need you to jump in. It doesn't have to be perfect the first time through, but that they have the support to try and make a mistake almost like our students. Or not make a mistake but make it better, and that that's going to be okay. It doesn't have to be perfect the first time through. And the time and the heads up that it's coming. It's good that it was mentioned at the staff meeting...this is happening. People can start thinking about it and researching if they want and talk about or get their fear out if they have any fear. I think the parent aspect is important. When my own children's school went to standards-based grading there were a lot of parent information meetings and a lot of papers sent home and if you were a parent who took advantage of that, it was up to the parent to come to the meetings or not. But there was a lot of opportunity to work yourself into understanding it. And then teachers probably need that kind of help too. Some teachers need more help than others, some more support than others

and you probably know your staff, you know who might need...and time. I think a 30-hour day...time is good.

Summary of Findings from Teacher Interview

Data from this group interview revealed benefits to teachers and students regarding the change needed to implement standards-based grading in District 32. The following findings can be deduced from the five themes that emerged in this research.

Finding 1: Grading Students by Standards Can Increase Accountability.

The teachers in this interview expressed that student accountability with learning can be affected by offering students the option to be reassessed on learning standards. This increase in student accountability from exposure to standards-based grading is supported by the work of Guskey and Bailey (2010), O'Conner (2009), O'Connor (2011), Brookhart (2011), Guskey (2002), and Vatterot (2015). Some teachers shared that their students were not familiar with the concept of retesting and sometimes were surprised they were offered this opportunity. Teachers also noticed that when students were offered a second chance to demonstrate understanding of learning standards, they viewed their learning experience as continuous and not finite. This phenomenon might be attributed to the retesting of learning standards until mastery. Teachers in this interview also stated their students often learned how to prepare for successful assessment performances through the exercise of retesting. The number of students who needed to participate in the reassessment process decreased as students became familiar with the preparatory procedures between assessments. Because students viewed learning as an ongoing event, it is suggested that standards-based instruction and assessment can increase student accountability for learning.

Finding 2: Grading Students by Standards Can Increase Motivation.

Teachers in this interview expressed that their students demonstrated increases in motivation due to receiving feedback based on learning standards. This boost in motivation can be attributed to students' desire to continue to improve on specific standards in which they have not yet reached mastery. Teachers also reported that when students received feedback based on learning standards, they tended to compare their performance more with themselves than their peers. According to these teachers, standards-based grades can produce less negative emotional reactions from students compared to traditional letter grades. Additionally, students' motivation can increase when they are made aware of specific learning standards that they *have* mastered. This confidence can help propel students through the preparation and performance involved in reassessments, which leads to further mastery of additional learning standards. All of these elements combine to increase chances of student learning. The net result of assessing students by learning standards is that students may view learning as a continuous process, one in which they wish to be a part. Creating supportive scaffolds for learning that can occur through the use of standards for grading is supported by the work of Pink (2009), Solarz (2015), and Dueck (2015).

Finding 3: Parents Find Value in Standards-Based Grading.

Teachers in this interview stated their students seldom inquired about what possible traditional letter grade they would be receiving in addition to the feedback they were given based on learning standards. These teachers surmised that such queries about traditional letter grades when they occurred might have originated from students' parents. Teachers also shared that the concept of retesting was novel and a foreign practice from

direct conversations with parents. When teachers explained to parents how students were given feedback based on learning standards and then given the opportunity to retest on specific standards, the reaction from parents was favorable toward that method of assessment.

Finding 4: Standards-Based Mindset Instruction Prepares Students for the Future.

Unlike what some critics might think, teachers in this interview stated that implementing elements of a standards-based mindset during grading such as allowing for reassessment of un-mastered standards actually prepares students for what awaits them not only in the next grade, but also beyond. Some of these teachers stated that preparing students for the learning and challenges that await them in the next school year *is* preparing students for *their* real world. In response to a hypothetical complaint that these assessment options are not fair, teachers stated that to *not* offer a retesting option was in fact unfair. Offering students multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding teaches students perseverance with respect to learning, a life skill that will benefit them in high school, college, and in their careers. Interviewed teachers also shared that students did not exploit the retest option by not preparing for assessments. Teachers stated their students appropriately prepared for each assessment opportunity, instead of relying on the multiple chances to prove mastery.

Finding 5: District 32 Instructional Units and Assessments Support Standards-Based Grading.

The units of instruction and assessments created by District 32 teachers are aligned to the CCSS. This fact makes the change to standards-based grading an easier task than if this were not the case. One area that teachers identified as a formidable

challenge with this change in grading practice involved the collection and organization of data. Part of this concern was that standards-based grading often uses an expanded format report card that includes not just achievement data but also an evaluation of learning behaviors and measures of student growth. These different types of data require teachers to be able to track, interpret, and use new and different types of data than previously.

Teachers in this interview recognized a sizable increase in teachers' understanding of elements of a standards-based mindset. This growth mindset will make the change to standards-based grading a less daunting task for District 32. Some teachers who have used standards-based grading during District 32 summer school have found it a formidable challenge compared to traditional grading but more accurate and beneficial to all stakeholders. Teachers in this interview recommended taking this change slowly and picking select classes in which to begin the implementation. A cautious beginning will allow teachers to build confidence in their abilities to provide feedback based on standards. Teachers expressed that their instructional units and assessments that are aligned with the CCSS will make this change easier though it will still be arduous.

SECTION SIX: A VISION OF SUCCESS (TO BE)

Introduction

Wagner et al. (2006) provide a framework for leading change that builds off the 4 Cs that have been identified in the “As Is” state in Section Two of this document. To bring about this desired change, Wagner et al. suggest we consider the question, “What would success look like if the problem you identified (in the middle of your As Is picture) were solved?” According to Wagner et al., it is necessary to consider the intended results that this new system is to generate (p. 119). As identified in the center section of the “To Be” chart, Appendix B, the desired outcome of this change project is: Teachers will maximize student learning using standards-based grading. In order to bring about this change, it is necessary to revisit Wagner’s 4 Cs: context, culture, conditions, and competencies. The vision of success involves what needs to be in place for the project goal to be successfully achieved.

Context

Context involves the social, historical, and economic elements within a system and how the system operates, as well as the skills required for students to be successful (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). In this “To Be” ideal scenario, students are provided feedback on their academic successes based on learning standards. Teachers actively develop students that are capable of solving all types of problems of differing degrees. Students excel and prosper intellectually as they grow into twenty-first century thinkers with the skills necessary to be competitive in society. The students of District 32 develop into college-and-career-ready citizens prepared for future learning and employment in the real world. All of these prosperous occurrences are brought to fruition regardless of

student demographics such as student culture, disability, or economic status. In order for all of these advantages to materialize, teachers maximize student learning using standards-based grading.

Culture

Wagner et al.'s (2006) explanation of *culture*, an element of the 4 Cs change protocol, involves the shared beliefs and values within a system (p. 102). In this ideal “To Be” scenario, communication between all stakeholders is clear and based on the district vision and mission. There is not a feeling of top-down leadership or a belief from teachers that they are without a voice in major decisions made within the district. One such decision of which teachers are a part is how they provide feedback to their students. The teacher voice in District 32 is respected and heard, making all teachers actively involved in the district’s major decisions. Beyond feeling empowered by an influential voice, all teachers have high expectations for all students regardless of demographics, challenges, and talents. The teachers of District 32 truly believe that all students are capable of hitting learning targets when provided with the appropriate scaffolds, such as accommodations to the learning conditions and modifications to curriculum and assessments. All of this occurs when teachers maximize student learning using standards-based grading.

Conditions

Wagner et al. (2006) includes the tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources in the definition of *conditions*. Conditions also contain the external frameworks under which a system operates surrounding student learning (p. 101). In this utopian “To Be” perspective, one of the conditions is a new and improved data collection system that

reduces statistical work being done by teachers. In this system, the efforts that teachers put forth are with student data analysis and not student data entry. Teachers are able to quickly and efficiently use student data in their instruction, which reduces frustration and wasted time with data storage. In this ideal existence, the common understanding of quality instruction with all stakeholders is increased. Through experience, teachers, administrators, parents, and students have a heightened awareness of the elements of instruction that increase student understanding. The leadership of District 32 at both the district and building level is in full support of each other in all matters of how the district operates. All of these components of the “To Be” perspective enable teachers to maximize student learning using standards-based grading.

Competencies

According to Wagner et al. (2006), *competencies* involve the abilities and capacities that impact student learning within an educational system (p. 99). This frequently includes teachers’ instructional skills and/or social interaction skills with other stakeholders within the system. In this ideal “To Be” world, communication regarding why a change to standards-based grading will benefit all stakeholders is clear. Teachers are aware that there is additional effort needed to set up some of the infrastructure necessary to change to this new method of reporting student understanding. But in the end, teachers grasp the value of standards-based grading and work to make this change smooth and successful. Students have knowledge of what this change in grading practice will entail and how they will benefit from it. Parents also are fully informed of what standards-based grading is and why a change in grading practices benefits their children.

Teachers in this perfect “To Be” scenario have an increased understanding of student academic data. This increased understanding of data includes analysis competencies that incorporate effective determination of intervention and corrective strategies based on students’ abilities, which are measured against learning standards. This accurate assessment of student learning needs by teachers leads to greater student understandings. Other stakeholders use standards-based grading in ways that increase student learning as well. This utopian perspective in District 32 involves students having an elevated understanding of learning standards and how these standards function as the guidelines for student learning. Students not only understand the student-friendly language of the learning targets that are aligned with the CCSS, but they also have the skills to gauge where they are with respect to reaching proficiency with these learning standards. The feedback students receive based on learning standards allows them to actively influence their own learning, increasing ownership and accountability. Parents too understand how to interpret the standards-based feedback they receive, which informs them of their children’s pursuit of learning standards. Through this increased knowledge of understanding learning standards, parents are able to support their children’s learning in an informed and accurate fashion.

In order for all of these changes to occur in the “To Be” scenario, all stakeholders must have a growth mindset that understands how flexibility is necessary to enact the shift to standards-based grading. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) described the adaptive leadership process, which involves observing what needs to change, interpreting what needs to change, and then adjusting the interventions put in place to create change (p. 32). This vigilance to effective change is taking place to bring about efficient and

successful new perspectives about grading. All stakeholders possess the skills to accept mid-course corrections of this new grading approach. As changes might occur in such things as frequency of grade reporting, or the format and components of the report card, stakeholders remain firm in their commitment to support standards-based grading. Stakeholders understand that any adjustments to this new method of grading are beneficial to everyone and ultimately increase student learning. Teachers maximize student learning using standards-based grading in this “To Be” scenario when all of these competencies are realized and put into action.

SECTION SEVEN: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

Introduction

In order to bridge the gap between the two scenarios previously presented in Section Two: Assessing the 4 Cs and Section Six: A Vision of Success (To Be), it is beneficial to consider specific strategies to bring about an effective transition to standards-based grading as well as actions aligned with these strategies that will help the transition take place. Through the application of Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 Cs, these strategies and actions can be presented in a meaningful manner.

Strategies and Actions

In order to change how District 32 evaluates students' performance, it will be necessary to enact these specific strategies to inform stakeholders of the benefits of standards-based grading practices. All stakeholders—students, parents, and teachers—will benefit from this change from traditional grading practices to standards-based grading.

Table 43

Strategies and actions

Strategy	Action
Provide all stakeholders with information on how learning can increase from use of standard-based grading.	<p>Inform teachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide literature explaining how and why standards-based grading benefits student learning • Provide exemplars of standards-based grading materials from other districts • Review of District 32 teacher survey data • Review of District 32 teacher interview data • Review of District 32 student survey data <p>Inform parents of standards-based grading value through multiple means</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional correspondence • Electronic correspondence • Social media • Town-hall style meetings • Review of District 32 student survey data • Review of District 32 teacher survey data • Review of District 32 teacher interview data
Involve all stakeholders in decisions involving changing grading practices.	<p>Solicit interest of teachers, administrators and parents to explore the value of standards-based grading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form committee involving all stakeholders • Set goals regarding communication of standards-based grading to all stakeholders • Communicate: various methods, traditional, electronic, social media
Gather data from students and teachers regarding perceptions and understandings of standards-based grading.	<p>Survey students</p> <p>Survey and interview teachers</p>
Establish more effective methods for storing and analyzing student data.	<p>Establish or adopt an effective/efficient student database</p> <p>Establish a data analysis team</p>

	Train teachers to be knowledgeable and proficient with new student database
Increase teachers' competencies for giving and receiving critical feedback during collaboration.	Provide teachers with collaboration and collective thinking protocols <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Learning Communities • Critical Friends Groups Provide teachers with professional development and literature that increases collaboration skills Work with principals to secure consistent collaborative practices monitored across the district
Increase teachers' competencies for using standards-based student data to improve instruction.	Provide teachers with professional development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding standards-based instruction • Analyzing standards-based data Differentiate instruction according to standards-based data

It is important to provide all stakeholders with information on how standard-based grading can enhance and increase learning. These actions include a review of literature that explains what standards-based grading is as described by education experts as well a review of District 32 student data that suggests the value of grading students with this approach. These efforts are necessary in order to convince stakeholders of the value of standards-based grading. Teachers and parents need greater understanding regarding the value of standards-based grading and the role it plays in learning. This can be found in the professional literature that has proliferated over the last 30 years. Through this literature, the value of standards-based grading and its influence on learning will help inform stakeholders how this progressive method of grading benefits students. In addition, several of these resources provide exemplars and samples of actual standards-based report cards. The presentation of such samples reduces uncertainty and apprehension when stakeholders undergo change.

Local data gathered from a teacher survey, a teacher interview, and a survey with students will provide a more grassroots perspective for the stakeholders of District 32. It is important that these data be collected to provide additional insights about the reality of implementing a grading policy based on standards. These data are a firsthand account of what adjustments are needed to smoothly transition to standards-based grading. All of this information will take District 32 from its “As Is” scenario of traditional grading to its “To Be” scenario of using standards, which may increase student learning.

It is necessary to establish a committee that involves teachers, administrators, parents, and eventually students, to discuss the purpose of changing to standards-based grading and the steps necessary to accomplish the transition. The creation of a specific timeline for the change plan involves communication of the change plan to all stakeholders. Communication will take place through traditional methods such as the U.S. mail, as well as correspondence transported by students in their Friday folders taken home from school each week. Electronic communication using the District 32 website, emails, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter are effective ways to communicate the purpose and timeline of this change plan. The most impactful means of communication of this change to standards-based grading will be through a series of meetings designed to present all aspects of this change plan.

It is necessary to gather data from students and teachers regarding perceptions and understandings of standards-based grading in order for a change in grading practice to be done effectively and efficiently. This strategy is important to obtain local perceptions of grading practices and assessment. This data can illustrate the local need for change to standards-based grading and the value it might have on student learning.

The manner in which student academic data are stored in District 32 is a detrimental process that robs teachers of their time and provides minimal options for analysis. This increases teacher frustration and limits the use of the data. To improve the conditions in District 32, it is essential to enact the strategy of establishing a more effective method for collecting and analyzing student data. With the switch to standards-based grading, a change in how data are gathered is a natural occurrence. Unlike in the past, CCSS-aligned data must be collected, which requires a more flexible data management system. To make this strategy a reality, a number of actions need to occur. First a database task force should be formed. The purpose of this task force would be to complete a district-wide needs assessment, exploring and documenting what data need to be stored, how the data need to be sorted, and how the data need to be accessed. The created database would incorporate the elements necessary to improve the conditions surrounding student data storage. Training District 32 teachers and administrators on the new database can help maximize educators' effectiveness. Because standards-based grading provides more information than the traditional practice of assigning a letter grade, the data tools used when grading by standards should store more detailed information.

In order to bring about any change, it will be necessary for teachers to play a major role. This is necessary to offset some of the culture deficits identified with District 32 teachers. It is necessary to provide District 32 teachers with tools to increase their collaboration skills to bring about effective change. The actions necessary to support this strategy include giving professional development to provide teachers with collaboration protocols that promote healthy and productive dialogue. Some of these professional

development conventions include Professional Learning Communities and Critical Friends Group protocols.

Increasing all stakeholders' knowledge of how to use standards-based grading to increase student learning is the singular strategy needed to successfully implement standards-based grading in District 32. A first action that will be necessary to achieve this strategy includes providing teachers and administrators with the necessary professional development to support their understanding of the purpose for standards-based grading and its benefits to students. Once teachers and administrators have this understanding, they realize that this type of grading better informs both instruction and the feedback provided to students and parents. Supports for students' understanding of standards-based grading is another action item in this strategy. This shift in grading practice can only be fully successful when students understand how grading based on standards can provide students with more information about their learning and ultimately increase their accountability and ownership of it. An additional action item includes providing parents with the supports and structures that allow them to understand the value of reporting student understanding based on standards. Parents will then learn how this more detailed information might give them additional insight into how to better encourage and support their child's learning.

Summary

The transition from traditional letter grades to standards-based grading is a feasible endeavor for District 32. By following Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 Cs—context, culture, conditions, and competencies—systems can make big changes effectively. This change process can occur in District 32. Through a methodical review of where all

stakeholders are currently at in their “As Is” state and a consideration of what it will take to get to their “To Be” state, the implementation of standards-based grading can effectively occur in District 32.

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Appendix A

Standards-Based Grading

Strategy	Action
Provide all stakeholders with information on how learning can increase from use of standard-based grading.	<p>Inform teachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide literature explaining how and why standards-based grading benefits student learning • Provide exemplars of standards-based grading materials from other districts • Review of District 32 teacher survey data • Review of District 32 teacher interview data • Review of District 32 student survey data <p>Inform parents of standards-based grading value through multiple</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional correspondence • Electronic correspondence • Social media • Town-hall style meetings • Review of District 32 student survey data • Review of District 32 teacher survey data • Review of District 32 teacher interview data
Involve all stakeholders in decisions involving changing grading practices.	<p>Solicit interest of teachers, administrators and parents to explore the value of standards-based grading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form committee involving all stakeholders • Set goals regarding communication of standards-based grading to all stakeholders • Communication: various methods, traditional, electronic, social media
Gather data from students and teachers regarding perceptions and understandings of standards-based grading.	<p>Survey students</p> <p>Survey and interview teachers</p>
Establish more effective methods for storing and analyzing student data.	<p>Establish or adopt an effective/efficient student database</p> <p>Establish a data analysis team</p> <p>Train teachers to be knowledgeable and</p>

	proficient with new student database
Increase teachers' competencies for giving and receiving critical feedback during collaboration.	<p>Provide teachers with collaboration and collective thinking protocols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Learning Communities • Critical Friends Groups <p>Provide teachers with profession development and literature that increases collaboration skills</p> <p>Work with principals to secure consistent collaborative practices monitored across the district</p>
Increase teachers' competencies for using standards-based student data to improve instruction.	<p>Provide teachers with professional development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding standards-based instruction • Analyzing standards-based data <p>Differentiate instruction according to standards-based data</p>

Appendix B

Teacher Survey to be Administered to all D32 Teachers

As stated in the High Impact Guide, our district plans to change the system for reporting student performance. We want to know your feelings about elements that often relate to issues around grading. Your perceptions will help us design changes to our grading systems that work well for all of us.

Questions 1-13 ask about your perceptions of particular grading practices.

1. Students' academic success is accurately represented when teachers give feedback on performance related to learning standards.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

2. Student assessment methods should be flexible to represent what a student knows, understands, and can do.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

3. The reporting of students' academic success might include behavioral performances such as conduct, attendance, promptness, etc.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

4. Zeros should be used when determining a student's grade.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

5. Assigning an “Incomplete” as a grade is a useful option for teachers until students provide evidence to demonstrate what they know, understand, or can do on a particular standard, skill, assessment, or activity.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

6. Students should be permitted to be reassessed to demonstrate an accurate representation of what they know, understand, and can do.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

7. Teachers should arrive at a final grade by averaging performance grades over the designated period of time.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

8. Teachers should accept late work without reducing points for the assignments.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

9. Teachers should provide students with rubrics and work exemplars prior to independent work.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

10. Students' self-assessment and goal setting should be a part of the assessment process.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

11. Performance in group-work should be included in a student's grade.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

12. Homework should be included in a student's grade.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

13. Non-academic extra credit (e.g., bringing in can goods for food drive, attending a school function) should not be calculated into a student's grade.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

Questions 14-21 ask about your perceptions of traditional grading practices and standards-based grading practices.

14. The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement is effective and informative for all stakeholders.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

15. Reporting student achievement by learning standards is effective and informative for all stakeholders.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

16. The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement provides students with accurate feedback to increase their learning.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

17. Reporting student achievement by learning standards provides accurate feedback to students to increase their learning.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

18. The current letter grade method for reporting student successes provides parents with accurate feedback regarding what a student knows, understands, and can do.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

19. Reporting student successes by learning standards provides parents with accurate feedback regarding what a student knows, understands, and can do.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

20. The current letter grade method for reporting student achievement gives teachers the opportunity to direct further instruction.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

21. Reporting student achievement by learning standards gives teachers the opportunity to direct further instruction.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

Additional comments

The final five items ask about your understanding of elements of standards and assessment.

Directions: For the following items rate your level of understanding.

<i>My understanding of ...is?</i>	High	Medium	Low
...Common Core State Standards...			
...the use of formative assessment...			
...standards-based grading...			
...how to implement standards-based grading...			
...the use of rubrics in scoring student work...			

Additional comments

Appendix C

Student Survey to be Administered to 4th, 6th (ELA), and 7th (Math) Traditional Grading and Standards-based Grading

1. Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F gives me information to know if I've learned something or not.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

2. Getting a score based on a learning standard gives me information to know if I've learned something or not.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

3. Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F gives me information so I know where I am stronger and where I need more work.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

4. Getting a score based on a learning standard gives me information so I know where I am stronger and where I need more work.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

5. Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F makes me want to try hard and continue to learn.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

6. Getting a score based on a learning standard makes me want to try hard and continue to learn.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

7. Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F can make me feel good about myself as a learner.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

8. Getting a score based on a learning standard can make me feel good about myself as a learner.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

9. Getting letter grades such as A, B, C, D, or F can make me feel bad about myself as a learner.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

10. Getting a score based on a learning standard can make me feel bad about myself as a learner.

strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree

11. It helps my learning to be graded

with a letter grade with a score based on a learning standard

Appendix D

Teacher Group Interview Questions

Did you see a change in your students when they received feedback based on standards as opposed to grades?

Can you describe any possible positive results from providing your students with feedback based on standards?

Can you describe any possible negative results from providing your students with feedback based on standards?

Do you think your students had a greater understanding of what they learned from being graded by standards and not letter grades?

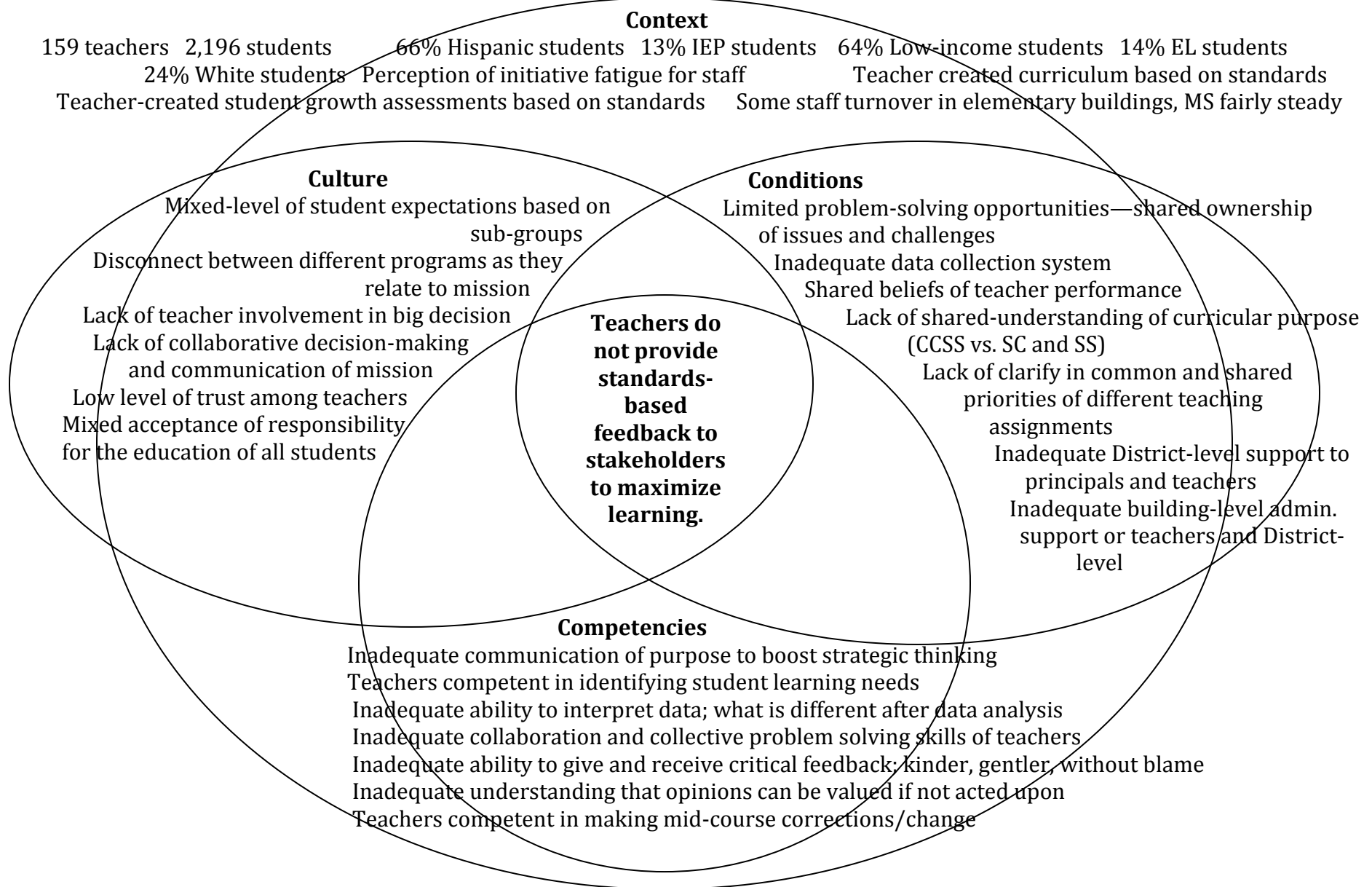
Did you have a greater understanding of what your students learned from grading them by standards and not letter grades?

Did any of your students demonstrate a high level of motivation due to being graded according to a standard? Can you share any specifics that might draw you to the conclusion that this elevated level of motivation was based on being graded on standards and not a letter grade?

Do you think your students took more ownership of their learning as a result of being graded by standards?

Appendix E

"As Is" 4 Cs Analysis for **Standards Based Grading**



Appendix F

"To Be" 4 Cs Analysis for Standards Based Grading

