A Case Study Of Secondary Students' Perspectives On Standards-Based Grading And The Development Of 21st Century Learner Attributes

Michelle Blackley

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A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON
STANDARDS-BASED GRADING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
21ST CENTURY LEARNER ATTRIBUTES

Michelle M. Blackley
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

National College of Education
National-Louis University
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Dissertation Hearing

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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Abstract

Implementation of standards-based grading (SBG) practices can be a high benefit, low-cost initiative that directly impacts student achievement and growth. This case study aimed to determine if the theoretical value of SBG outlined in research aligns to the students’ perspectives of its value on academic learning, growth and development of 21st century skills. Secondary students were interviewed and responses were organized into three themes: development of 21st century learner attributes, strengths of SBG and areas to improve. Results revealed that SBG supports individualized learning pace, development of a growth mindset, emotional well-being, student to teacher collaboration and 21st century learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-directed learning. Areas of change include continued parent education, teacher consistency across classrooms, and clarification of success criteria and rate of growth relative to enduring standards.
Acknowledgments

One year into writing this dissertation, the world was faced with the global Coronavirus pandemic. The effects of the pandemic were unprecedented. The entire landscape of education was changed as schools were forced to educate students remotely. Inequities in educational access became starkly visible as educators worked to provide quality remote experiences to students with limited technological resources. Innovation, creativity and flexibility became the norm as teachers worked to develop effective pedagogies in a virtual classroom. Students were isolated from the supports of in-person learning and were forced to become stewards of their own learning. However, the students of Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School overcame the burdens of the pandemic and learning loss was significantly less than what was witnessed in schools across the state and the country.

I am confident that the students’ success during the pandemic was attributed to the dedication, innovation and commitment of the staff. Additionally, I believe that students’ pre-pandemic experiences with standards-based grading provided the training for remote learning. By having learned the skills of self-assessment, self-monitoring and self-directed learning they truly became effective stewards of their own learning. I am hopeful this case study provides the impetus for teachers and school leaders to commit to standards-based grading because of its value to enhance learning, regardless of its venue.

I am fortunate to have a robust support system of colleagues and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. I am beyond grateful for the many ways they provided emotional and professional support. However, I specifically want to
acknowledge the incredible support of my family, my husband, William, and sons, Liam and Gavin. They unconditionally encouraged and supported me with love, humor and understanding.

Thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Don Angelaccio, for sharing your encouragement, knowledge and expertise that guided me through this experience. Thank you to Dr. Christine Nelson for your continued feedback coupled with your warmth and positivity. Finally, thank you to the incredible students who participated in this study; your insight will guide future work and ultimately improve learning and growth for others.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving husband, William, and my sons, Liam and Gavin. They encouraged me to pursue this endeavor, motivated me when my stamina was waning and never doubted my ability to see this through to completion.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Finlay School District is a nationally recognized, award-winning elementary district located in the North Shore area of Lake County, Illinois. At the turn of the century, the Village’s population totaled 6,108 divided into 2,134 households with a median household income of $134,259. The Finlay School District serves approximately 1,800 students in three schools; Finlay Middle School has a population of over 650 students in grades six through eight. The student population of the district is racially and ethnically diverse: over 50% of the population are non-white students primarily identifying as Asian. The district’s student body consists of 1% low-income students, 13% students with disabilities, 8% English learners, 0% homeless or chronically truant students, and it boasts a 96% student attendance rate. The pupil-to-teacher ratio is 15:1, and is substantially below the state average of 19:1. The district’s per student spending is over $9,000/year, about $1000/student above the state average.

Students who currently, and previously, attended Finlay Middle School are the focus of this study. The school was awarded an exemplar summative designation on the 2018 Illinois State Report Card; performing in the top 10% of the schools statewide, with no underperforming student groups. Additionally, 92% of the students in Grade 8 performed at or above “proficient” on the Illinois Science Assessment, 96% of students in grades 6-8 met or exceeded in ELA on the 2018 PARCC assessment, and 94% met or exceeded expectations in math on the 2018 PARCC assessment.

As a newly appointed principal, I entered the district at the beginning of the strategic planning and vision creation process in 2014. I collaborated with the strategic planning committee to analyze both teacher and parent survey data to develop actionable goals addressing
focus areas developed by the Board of Education. The focus areas were: 1. Curriculum and Assessment, 2. Culture and Climate, 3. Facilities, 4. Transportation and Student Schedules and 5. Financial Stability. My dual role in the community, as an administrator and parent, allowed me to be wholly versed in the development of educational programming aligning to the articulated goals of the strategic plan.

48% of staff, and 17% of parents surveyed, reported that the district “should increase expenditures to increase programming”. When asked “What should be the curriculum, assessment and innovative learning priorities for the district?” over 83% of staff and 77% of parents selected “Ability for students to be creative, analytical and critical thinkers”. Both parents and teachers were asked to prioritize the five strategic plan focus areas, and overwhelming both groups ranked Curriculum, Assessment and Innovative Learning as the first priority, 62% of the parents and 37% of the staff. From this input, the district’s operational strategic plan included the following goals: increase opportunities for critical and analytical thinking, creativity and collaboration across the curriculum and enhancing education in social emotional learning (SEL), digital citizenship, leadership and executive functioning. Recent visioning work expanded the focus of the strategic plan to include a Portrait of a Graduate into Vision 2025. The articulated portrait identifies core competencies and behaviors that students would perfect during their tenure in the district.

Additionally, Finlay Middle School is a 6-8 consortium school that feeds into the Lincoln 9-12 District, which was ranked 46th in the nation’s STEM programs by U. S. News and World Report in 2015. Also, Niche.com ranked Lincoln as the best public high school in Illinois in 2016, and in October 2020 named them the #1 best school district in America. Because of this, Finlay’s instructional program purposefully supports Lincoln High School’s academic mission.
and its curriculum develops students’ skills in writing, technology and social emotional learning through engaging and challenging learning activities. In 2016, Lincoln High School began transitioning its grading practices to a standards-based model. Freshman students from Finlay Middle School were unprepared for this philosophical shift in grading practices. Personally, both of my children found the transition to high school more challenging than most, as their previous experiences were solely based on traditional grading philosophies and not on standards-based grading practices.

**Purpose**

As the principal of Finlay Middle School, I was tasked with advancing the district’s goals of developing 21st century learner attributes while considering the fact that our students were heading into a competency-based grading system in grades 9-12. This unique situation provided the platform to develop and implement a standards-based grading program at Finlay Middle School. For three years, teachers, community members and administrators worked to create a scaffolded plan of implementation that included professional development, identification of standards and modification of the student report card.

In the 2017-2018 school year, the Finlay Middle School teachers removed learner behaviors such as preparedness, productivity, participation and homework completion from grade calculations. Instead, they reported on these behaviors separately. In order to provide grades that clearly communicated to students progress towards mastery of standards, marks needed to be accurate and meaningful. Parents and students needed to know exactly what was learned, and what opportunities existed for practice, reflection and growth. Providing an accurate grade meant assessing and grading only in reference to evidence of academic standards
or course specific skills. If an activity or project is part of the course curriculum and is aligned to course standards, then it could be evaluated and included as evidence on a report card.

In reality, many elements often influence a student’s grade that are unrelated to their mastery or understanding of content. These are typically related to behaviors such as not completing tasks, submitting in work late or not at all, or not participating in class. While these learner characteristics speak to the habits of the student, they may not reflect the student’s understanding of content and/or the application of skills. "A grade should give as clear a measure as possible of the best a student can do. Too often, grades reflect an unknown mixture of multiple factors. Unless teachers throughout a school or district completely agree on the elements and factor them into their grading in a consistent way, the meaning of a grade will vary from classroom to classroom" (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 128).

After one year of implementing a reporting system that charted learner behaviors separate from the academic content grade, Finlay Middle School teachers, across all three grade levels (grades 6-8), implemented a full standards-based grading and reporting system in 2018-2019. The impetus behind this transition was based on the research of John Hattie (2009), indicating that high quality formative assessment (informal assessment that occurs in the classroom to inform the teacher as to where students stand in the learning path) and feedback directly related to specific learning standards have a powerful impact on student learning and growth. Hattie’s research suggests an effect size on standardized tests that exceeds the impact of most known educational interventions (Hattie, 2009, p. 53). Furthermore, grading and reporting aligned to highly-specified standards, accompanied with ongoing assessment feedback to students, significantly boosts both motivation and achievement for students. The hope was a
standards-based grading model would provide the platform to reap the benefits of Hattie’s proposed effect sizes on learning.

According to Guskey and Jung, a standard-based grading and reporting system is more about communicating better and more accurate information to families and students in order to provide the basis for improving student learning. Whether or not this leads to specific improvements depends not on the information itself, but on how that information is used (Guskey & Jung, 2008). Instead of offering a general overall indicator of performance, standards-based reporting provides teachers, parents and students with detailed information on individual performance so improvement efforts can be better targeted and more effective.

Furthermore, standards-based grading should help students and teachers think about thinking. Students should develop an awareness of what they are doing, where they are going and how they are getting there; they need to know what to do when they do not know what to do. “Such self-regulation, or meta-cognitive skills are one of the ultimate goals of all learning: they are what we often mean by ‘lifelong learning’ and it is why we want students to become their own teachers” (Hattie, 2012, p.115).

One of the critical attributes of a properly implemented standards-based grading program is its potential to create students, and teachers, who are learning to learn. “The greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers. When students become their own teachers, they exhibit the self-regulatory attributes that seem most desirable for learners (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-teaching)” (Hattie, 2012, p.18). These learner attributes are further articulated in the district’s Vision 2025 planning and development of a core set of competencies identified as the Portrait of a Graduate. Figure 1 defines the core competencies students should
possess when leaving Finlay Middle School. The competencies do not center on academic achievement. Rather, they center on learner behaviors that align to the 21st century attributes stakeholders hope to develop in students.

**Figure 1**

*Learner Attributes of a Finlay Middle School Graduate*

Because the change to standards-based grading and reporting was an immense paradigm shift for students, teachers, and parents, the first year of implementation was simply working through the *how* of the task at hand. Teachers worked to understand how to execute the process in their classrooms, to identify evidences towards standards learning and to use that evidence to report on each students’ progress at the trimesters. Although the teachers should be applauded on their efforts, the reality is the implementation was a building mandate and teachers had little choice in whether or not they would comply. Teachers received autonomy as to how they would transition their formative and summative assessment practices within in their classroom to algin
to standards-based grading. In some cases, processes, procedures and rubrics did not align across disciplines or grade levels. Teachers found themselves in a day-to-day survival mode and had not yet transitioned into understanding how to best use information on student learning to guide instruction and empower student ownership over learning. Furthermore, the lack of confidence with the system created a scenario in which teachers found it difficult to champion the benefits and/or effectively explain the impetus of the system to parents and students.

After two years of implementation, coupled with the focus of the district on the learner attributes of a Finlay Middle School graduate, it was evident that continued professional development, instructional support and assessment guidance was needed in order for the standards-based reporting system to create learners who know how to learn in both curricular areas and learner behaviors.

Rationale

As principal of Finlay Middle School, maximizing learning and achievement for all students was my mission. However, with such high academically achieving students, and the clear articulation of learner behaviors, it was evident that in order to markedly grow students, the instructional focus had to exceed content curriculum and include the development of 21st century learner attributes. The students at Finlay excelled at being knowers, at memorizing and recalling information. They needed instruction, support and guidance on being learners. Developing skills such as perseverance, critical thinking, adaptability and collaboration. From Tony Wagner’s interview with Mark Maddox of Unilever, he shares that the workforce needs people who practice self-direction, continuous improvement and teamwork (Wagner, 2014). Embedding a cross curricular focus on learner behaviors and practices into the culture of the
institution is supported by Wagner’s claim that studying academic content is the means of developing competencies, instead of being the goal (Wagner, 2014).

For the students of Finlay Middle School, a purposeful culture of creating experiences that influence and develop learner attributes continues to be the goal. However, purposefully teaching, developing and fostering the learner attributes of a 21st century learner, can be elusive, obscure and even difficult to measure. Questions remain. Can a standards-based grading system improve this type of learning? Does it create a platform for learner competencies to inherently develop? Are students reaping the benefits of a standards-based grading system?

According to Guskey and Jung (2013), there aren’t any well designed systematic studies that link standards-based systems to an improvement in student learning. However, Grant Wiggins shares that decades of educational research support the idea that by teaching less and providing more feedback, can produce greater learning (Wiggins, 2012). The thought is a well implemented standards-based grading model can provide a framework in which teachers can effectively give students feedback and in turn the students can learn how to use the feedback in ways that develop their 21st century learner attributes. As discussed in the book, Developing Assessment Capable Visible Learners, skilled teachers employing competency-based grading that focuses on mastery and uses quality assessments can foster a culture in which students can make decisions about their own learning (Frey, Hattie, & Fisher, 2018).

**Goals**

The impetus behind my study is both professional and personal. As an instructional leader I understand the philosophical ideology behind standards-based grading. As a parent of children that have been living the system during their secondary years of schooling, I have reflected on the changes in discussions we have had about their learning. In the past, at-home
conversations about school centered on what grade my children earned on projects, quizzes and summative assessments. Conversations evolved into dialogue about learning they demonstrated and in what areas they need to improve. My children’s studying techniques changed from focusing on a generalized review of notes, homework and activities to a purposeful focus on skills that were outlined in clearly articulated standards. Statements such as, “My teacher has evidence that I know standards 2a and 2c, I just need to practice standard 2b”, was motivating for me as an educator and as a parent, and it gave me hope that they were not only experiencing greater academic learning but were developing 21st century learner attributes that would help them become stewards of their own learning. I have witnessed the growth of my own children as learners who self-monitor, self-assess and self-teach.

As the instructional leader for Finlay Middle School, I wanted all students to reap the benefits and embrace the value of standards-based grading. However, after surveying students at the end of the first year of implementation and having conversations with Lincoln High School students and parents, it was apparent that not all stakeholders found value in standards-based grading practices. These experiences served as the catalyst for my inquiry and the purpose of my study was to understand if the theoretical value of standards-based grading outlined in research aligns to the local (student) perspective of its value. The study describes and provides insight into the students’ perspectives on standards-based (competency based) grading.

**Research Questions**

The primary and secondary research questions that guided the inquiry were as follows:

*Primary Question: What are common attitudes and experiences of secondary students operating in a standards-based grading system?*

A. What are students’ perceptions of the strengths of a standards-based grading model?
B. What are students’ perceptions of the weaknesses of a standards-based grading model?  

*Secondary Question:* What is the function of a standards-based grading system on the development of 21st century learner attributes (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-teaching)?

**Conclusion**

In summary, a standards-based grading model alone does not ensure growth in student learning nor does it guarantee greater academic achievement. If we consider scaffolding the teaching and learning of 21st century learner attributes from a backwards design lens, a standards-based grading model can serve as a foundational concept. After two years of implementation at Finlay Middle School, we have learned that standards-based grading does open the door for providing students, teachers and parents more detailed and useful information on learning. By design, it forces all stakeholders to think about grades not just as an average of points garnered but in terms of what it is students should know and be able to do in each content area. It also provides very clear information on what learner behaviors are expected and encouraged. The hope is this study will help administrators not only better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the program but also students’ perspectives regarding the function of standards-based grading on the development of learners who self-monitor, self-evaluate, self-assess and self-teach.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Education in today’s world lives in a perpetual state of change. Student needs, society expectations, and accountability are all constantly rising, while we try to provide learning experiences for students that will prepare them for an increasingly complex world. School leaders and teachers are continually looking to implement strategies and programming that will provide a platform for the development of students so they will be successful in the 21st century workforce.

It isn’t usual for a school principal to have the luxury of a high achieving, intrinsically motivated, parent-supported learning community. With conditions such as this, discipline is minimal, pedagogy is rigorous and test scores continually rank highest in the state. This scenario created an environment for me, the instructional leader, in which teachers have the time and energy, to focus on the implementation of best practices, and administrators have the time to support them. Furthermore, when a student population has aptitudes that are standard deviations above the national average and consistently outperform state and national peers, looking beyond achievement and focusing on the development of learner attributes becomes a reality.

With such high academically achieving students, it became evident that in order to markedly grow students, the instructional focus had to go beyond content curriculum and include the development of 21st century learner attributes. Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School students excel at being knowers; they need instruction, support and guidance on being learners. Embedding a cross curricular focus on learner behaviors and practices into the culture of the building was supported by Wagner’s claim that studying academic content is the means of
developing competencies, instead of being the goal (Wagner, 2014). For the students, a priority goal became the purposeful development of a learning environment that creates experiences and embeds in processes that influence and develop 21st century learner attributes.

As the principal of Finlay Middle School, a collaborative decision was made to drastically change and ultimately improve the grading practices across all content areas and grade levels. This decision centered on the fact that grading and reporting are an integral part of the larger educational system of communication, assessment, motivation and instruction. With an abundance of classroom resources, professional development opportunities for staff and curricular supports, finding a way to enhance student growth required going beyond implementation of new pedagogy and the addition of more resources. The stage was set and the teachers were philosophically in line with updating, refining and improving our grading practices. The building leadership team determined that the implementation of standards-based grading processes would become the primary focus of the school improvement plan and building visioning.

Arguably, grading is one of the most powerful, far reaching, impactful processes in a school system. Fullan states, “Every successful organization pursues a small number of core priorities (that have high leverage power) and does them exceedingly well” (Fullan, 2010, p. 4). Reeves (2011) suggests that grading is a core part of an entire system that must be changed. He considers grading and reporting to be a “high-leverage strategy that will, when effectively implemented, help every other element of the system improve” (Reeves, 2011, p. 79). This is further supported by the authors of A School Leaders Guide to Standards-Based Grading (2014), in which they suggest that changing grading practices impacts all parts of an educational system including curriculum, instruction and assessment practices. They too reveal that standards-based
grading is a high-leverage strategy that has the power to improve every other element of the system (Heflebower, Hoegh & Warrick, 2014).

In spite of its leveraging power, we cannot dismiss the fact that grading is a well-entrenched element of education in the United States and around the world. As Lynn Olson (1995) implies, “Grades are one of the most sacred traditions in American education… the truth is that… grades have acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools. They are the primary, shorthand tool for communicating to parents how children are faring” (Olson, 1995, p. 24). The sanctity of grading is not just an American tradition, it spans the international landscape of education. With over fifty percent of the student body coming from Asian or Indian backgrounds, it became evident that the importance of grades in these cultures far exceeded American expectations. Most students came directly from countries in which education and grading literally could mean the difference between perishing and surviving. A change in the way we reported on student achievement would not only make a long held educational tradition defunct, but it would also challenge deep rooted cultural perspectives on grading.

Consequently, reforming grading practices required teachers, students and parents to reconsider long-held beliefs about what grades mean, how they should be assigned and how they can be used appropriately. Researchers insist that although standards-based grading is a substantial change to current grading and assessment practices, it is well worth the effort. (Heflebower, et al., 2014). Be that as it may, is it truly well worth the effort? Are students able to reframe their beliefs about grading? Can a standards-based grading system serve as the platform for advancing not just academic learning, but promoting the development of learner behaviors that students need for success in the twenty-first century?
The Fundamental Purpose of Grading

Grading and reporting processes are foundational in nearly every educational system and traditionally have served many purposes from communication to sorting and selecting. In my role as a building principal, percentages and letter grades had been used to identify math placement, enrichment, intervention, athletic eligibility and even membership in the National Junior Honor Society. Furthermore, traditional grading was implemented under the polarized caveat of reward and punishment. Students with certain grade point averages were celebrated by being listed on the honor roll and for others, their percentages and letter grades served as a criterion for admittance into mandated after-school intervention programs.

For decades, achievement has been expressed as a letter grade or percentage that represents the teacher’s best judgement of a student’s performance. Their judgement is supported by a calculated grade using arbitrarily assigned points from arbitrarily selected evidence. “Points based grading is preoccupied with numbers, rather than communication. Final grades are sourced from gradebook figures that lack integrity and may not be accurate reflections of students’ proficiency levels” (Iamarino, 2014, p. 3).

When Iamarino (2014) closely reviewed classes that exclusively used point-based systems, it revealed a discrepancy between intended and actual learning outcomes. Even though the addition or subtraction of points was meant to reward or penalize students for the quality of their performance in a class, theoretically making them more accountable to their academic responsibilities. This close review revealed that points-based grading is actually having an adverse effect on students’ motivation to improve their understanding of the subject matter (Iamarino, 2014).
In a study by Frey and Fisher (2013), they aimed to answer the question, does the grading we do pay off in terms of improved student understanding of writing? The results were as follows:

Of the nearly 550 high school students who responded to the question about feedback, over 80 percent of them selected (that they wanted) “to know what grade I got and generally how I did”. They were not interested in “Edits to improve my writing” (3 percent), “information about my understanding of the content” (12 percent), or “specific and detailed information about my performance (4 percent). (Frey & Fisher, 2013, p. 66)

These results highlighted the overarching inefficiency of a points-based system (it does not encourage a continuum of improvement) and students are losing nearly all interest in improving work once they received a final points-based grade. Frey and Fisher noted that although students typically complied with teachers’ revision requests, there was little evidence that it advanced student learning in a way that they would apply the learning to future pieces of writing.

According to Ken O’Connor (2011), “effective grades need to meet four overarching criteria: they must be accurate, meaningful, consistent and support learning” (O’Connor, 2011, p. 3). However, when determining grades under the traditional practice of combining large amounts of varied data into one single summary symbol, grades become diluted, inaccurate and can lead to poor decisions about learning for both students and teachers. This is due to the fact that traditional grading blends achievement with behaviors (effort, participation, preparedness, homework completion).

When teachers are asked to explain the purpose of grading, two distinct perspectives emerge. “One purpose is to provide a normative basis for sorting and discriminating amongst
the performances of students: normative based grading. The second perspective is that grades reflect the degree to which students have learned, accomplished or achieved; this is considered a criterion referenced perspective” (Guskey, 2015, p. 55). In any educational setting where the central purpose is to encourage student learning, grading and reporting should always be done in reference to specific learning criteria. Grades based on criteria have direct meaning and well serve the purpose of communication.

In What We Know About Grading, a summary of early studies on the reliability of grades indicates that traditional grades are unreliable (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Teaching toward achievement of specific standards implies that educators should be able to measure and report that achievement more accurately. “Thus, clarity and press for transparency are the basis of the standard-based reform movement” (Guskey, 2015, p. 26).

When considering the purpose of grading, in my role as a junior high principal, it was determined that grades should not only accurately communicate where students are in their learning relative to content standards but they should also describe the development of learner attributes such as preparedness, collaboration, participation. The improved content reporting was intended to provide students with information on how they are doing, in what areas they can improve and how they can focus efforts on improvement. Thus, providing the clarity and transparency that Guskey suggests.

What Does the Research Propose about Standards-based Grading (SBG)?

“In order for grades to be useful, they need to be meaningful. They must communicate useful information to students and to everyone interested or needing to know about their learning” (O’Connor, 2011, p. 4). If grades are to be accurate reflections of what students know and are able to do, they must be valid and reliable. The first step in ensuring validity and
reliability, is making sure that grades are meaningful by clarifying both the purpose of grades and the format we use to report them.

Implementation of a standards-based grading approach has many advantages over a traditional grading system. The work of educators to identify critical learning criteria from state standards develops an intimate and in depth understanding of the content. Standards-based grading also helps to improve reporting validity, reliability, fairness and usefulness. It can serve as a road map for students and teachers relative to clearly articulated learning goals. This detail in student progress can inform student remediation and enrichment ultimately targeting work on closing achievement gaps. “Standards-based grading becomes a direct link to enhancing student learning for all students” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 65).

In her article, *The Benefits of Standards-Based Grading: A Critical Evaluation of Modern Grading Practices*, author Danielle Iamarino further explains the value of standards-based grading:

Instead of defaulting to previously recorded grades, and calculating a final grade from the resulting accumulation of points, standards-based grading seeks to verify that a student not simply completes a certain amount of assignments but that a student has gained the tools necessary to succeed in future assignments. (Iamarino, 2014, p. 3)

This perspective aligns to John Hattie’s research that indicates that “high quality formative assessment (informal assessment that occurs in the classroom to inform the teacher as to where students are in the learning cycle) and feedback that is directly related to specific standards for learning have a powerful impact on student learning, showing an effect size on standardized tests that exceeds the impact of most known educational interventions” (Hattie, 2009, p. 174). Furthermore, grading and reporting aligned to specific standards, accompanied
with ongoing assessment and feedback to students, has been shown to significantly boost both motivation and achievement for students.

In an exploratory study done to determine the reactions of parents and teachers to a new reporting form, households received both a traditional and a standards-based report card. A letter accompanying the report cards explained the purpose of the two forms and encouraged parents to discuss the advantages and disadvantages. A survey was given to the parents that obtained feedback on the following four areas: 1. The amount of information offered, 2. The quality of information provided, 3. The clarity of information included, and 4. The ease in understanding the information presented. The teachers reported that they found the method provided more information and better-quality information that was easier to understand. They also reported that the process was more time consuming, but the value added was worth the additional time. Parents were significantly more positive and more consistent in their responses to the standards-based report cards than the teachers. Ironically, the parents found the information easier to understand than the participating teachers. However, parents were found to have conflicting ideas of the purpose of grading and some appeared to have more confidence with numerical percentages (Swan, Guskey & Jung, 2014).

In the report, *A Century of Grading Research: Meaning and Value in the Most Common Educational Measure*, the authors synthesized the findings from five types of grading studies: (a) early studies of the reliability of grades on student work, (b) quantitative studies of the composition of K–12 report card grades and related educational outcomes, (c) survey and interview studies of teachers’ perceptions of grades and grading practices, (d) studies of standards-based grading (SBG) and the relationship between students’ report card grades and
large-scale accountability assessments, and (e) grading in higher education. The central question underlying all of the studies was, “What do grades mean?”.

The authors further suggest that standards-based grading (SBG) recommendations emphasize communicating student progress in relation to grade-level standards (e.g., adding fractions, computing area) that describe performance using ordered categories (e.g., below basic, basic, proficient, advanced) and involve separate reporting of work habits and behavior. Some researchers assert that standards-based grading can provide exceptionally high-quality information to parents, teachers, and students and, therefore, has the potential to bring about instructional improvements and larger educational reforms. Others urge caution. Cizek (2000), for example, warned that SBG may be no better than other reporting formats and subject to the same misinterpretations as other grading scales.

Studies also exist on how standards-based grading can enhance communication. For example, Swan, Guskey, and Jung found that parents, teachers, and students preferred SBG over traditional report cards, with teachers considering adopting SBG having the most favorable attitudes. Teachers implementing SBG reported that it took longer to record the detailed information included in the SBG report cards but felt the additional time was worthwhile because SBGs yielded higher-quality information (Swan et al., 2014). However, an informal report by Guskey (2004) found that many parents attempted to interpret nearly all labels (e.g. below basic, basic, proficient, advanced) in terms of letter grades.

There is a multitude of research on grading, an array of professional articles and a growing number of books centered on standards-based grading exist. However, most standards-based grading studies have focused on the implementation of SBG reforms and the relationship of SBG to state achievement tests. This focus makes sense as achievement on state assessments
directly correlates to the status of schools and in some cases state funding. Despite the fact that the literature on the implementation of standards-based grading is extensive, empirical studies are few, as indicated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Main Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cox (2011)</td>
<td>Focus group; interview</td>
<td>16 high school teachers</td>
<td>Although a district policy limited the impact of non-achievement factors on grades, teachers varied a great deal in their implementation of high implementers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guskey, Swan, and Jung (2010)</td>
<td>Survey; descriptive</td>
<td>24 elementary and secondary teachers and 117 parents</td>
<td>Teachers and parents believed that a standards-based report card provided high-quality, clear, and more understandable information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howley, Kusimo, and Parrott (1999)</td>
<td>Interviews; surveys; test scores; GPA</td>
<td>52 middle school girls and 52 of their teachers</td>
<td>Half of the variance in GPA could be explained by test scores, but the relationship between grades and test scores varied by school; teachers differed in the extent to which non-cognitive factors like effort were used to determine grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMunn, Scheck, and McCloskey (2003)</td>
<td>Interviews; focus groups; observations; surveys; document analysis</td>
<td>241 teachers, all levels</td>
<td>Teachers who volunteered to participate in a standards-based grading effort reported changing their grading practices to be more standards-based after participating in professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.A. Ross and Kostuch (2011)</td>
<td>Grades; test scores; student demographics</td>
<td>15,942 students randomly sampled from the population of students in Ontario</td>
<td>However, classroom observations and student focus group data indicated that implementation of standards-based practice was not as widespread as teachers reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan, Guskey, and Jung (2014)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>115 parents, 383 teachers, both in a district in which grades and traditional report cards were concurrently generated</td>
<td>Moderate correlations were observed between grades and test scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh and D’Agostino (2009); Welsh, D’Agostino, and Kaniskan (2013)</td>
<td>Interviews; 2 years of standards-based grades; 2 years of test scores</td>
<td>37 elementary teachers were interviewed, 80 elementary classrooms provided student-level grades and test scores</td>
<td>Both teachers and parents preferred standards-based over traditional report cards, with teachers indicating the greatest preference; teachers also reported that although standards-based grades took more time to generate, the effort was worthwhile due to improvements in the quality of information provided</td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
In a study by Zlata Vassova, she points to the use of criterion-referenced assessments at the secondary level as a way to promote positive learning experiences. When the criteria are known to students, students also know how they can improve their performance. Assessment of students in a criterion referenced system moves beyond just knowing the content of a subject, to learning the skills and competencies that the students should learn to deeply understand the content. Vassova concluded, “Criterion referenced assessment had a positive impact on the student’s experiences and their attitudes towards education” (Vassova, n.d., p. 272).

Instead of offering a general overall indicator of performance, standards-based reporting provides teachers, parents and students with detailed information on individual performance so that improvement efforts can be more targeted and effective. Furthermore, it should help students and teachers think about thinking. Students should develop an awareness of what they are doing, where they are going and how they are getting there; they need to know what to do when they do not know what to do. “Such self-regulation, or meta-cognitive skills, are one of the ultimate goals of all learning: they are what we often mean by ‘lifelong learning’ and it is why we want students to become their own teachers” (Hattie, 2012, p. 115).

Standards-based grading compels teachers to distinguish product, process and progress criteria. This can help clarify the meaning of grades and can offer more accurate information relative to a student’s performance and foster the development of self-assessment, self-regulation and self-direction.

**Standards-Based Grading and 21st Century Learner Attributes**

As education tries to keep up with societal changes, we are no longer educating students for an industrialized society. In fact, technology has made many of these jobs obsolete. Schools must educate students for jobs and careers that haven’t even been created. It requires students to
be flexible, creative and self-driven learners. In *On Your Mark*, Thomas Guskey further highlights this need by stating, “Educators must help every student develop advanced knowledge and 21st-century skills. Instead of being concerned with selecting and sorting the talented few, we must be committed to developing talents of all students” (Guskey, 2015, p. 4).

Developing the *talents* of all students isn’t solely about physical or academic talents, schools need to consider how they develop the talents students will need to live and work in our future societies. In *On What is Learned in School*, Dreeben (2002) highlights the important role that schools play in teaching children to function outside of their families and in preparing them for adulthood and work. Dreeben outlines four norms that students need to adopt in order to differentiate from their family unit and prepare for future occupations and civic life: independence, achievement, universalism, and specificity. Can standards-based grading help learning and growth in both independence and achievement ultimately fostering development of 21st century learner attributes?

Students’ acceptance of the norms of independence and achievement contribute to behaviors that are commonly considered to be educationally-appropriate and conducive to classroom learning. These include valuing academic success, accepting and taking account of evaluations, following instructions, and seeking to improve academic assessments. Furthermore, Dreeben suggests that well-socialized students, as defined by these criteria, are likely to receive positive feedback from teachers – both informally through classroom interactions and formally through grades. “When students are judged by clearly articulated achievement criteria, experiences with independence and achievement are automatically built into the assignment-performance-evaluation sequence of the work” (Dreeben, 2002, p.71). This is the foundational philosophy of standards-based grading processes.
However, does the clarity of standards-based grading provide an environment that fosters experiences with independence and achievement? Brookhart suggests that it would. She states that, “The best thing you can do is make sure your grades convey meaningful, accurate information about student achievement. “If grades give sound information to students, then their perceptions (and) conclusions about themselves as learners, and decisions about future activity will be the best they can be” (Brookhart, 2004, p. 34).

When schools take on the mission of cultivating students’ thinking and enculturating the habits of mind and dispositions that can support lifelong learning, the issue of how students construe thinking and their general meta-cognitive awareness comes to the surface. J.B. Biggs, (1987) stated “To be properly metacognitive, then, students have to be realistically aware of their own cognitive resources in relation to the task demands and then to plan, monitor, and control those resources” (Biggs, 1987, p. 75). Researcher, Danielle Iamarino further discusses how development of metacognitive skills in students directly links to learning systems, such as standards-based grading, that clarify progress to students.

Considering ideas of self-worth, placing implicit value on the critical, moral and social development of the human mind, achievements and deficits cannot responsibly be qualified by an amount (or lack) of points. In order to accurately identify and respond to accomplishments and impediments in a learning process that encompass such broad goals as cognitive development, individualized attention must be given to the student by the teacher clarifying their progress. (Iamarino, 2014, p. 3)

A general assumption with standards-based models is that there is a clear criterion from which students can assess their learning process and guide future action. It is assumed that learners set standards or goals to strive for in their learning, monitor their progress toward these
goals, and then adapt and regulate their cognition, motivation and behavior in order to reach these goals. “Mastery goals orient the student towards learning and understanding, developing new skills, and a focus on self-improvement using self-referenced standards” (Vrught & Oort, 2008, p. 125). When standards-based grading is implemented in a classroom, it provides students with the opportunities to interact with, and make decisions regarding, their learning.

According to Vrught & Oort (2008), when students pursue mastery goals, they are motivated to master and learn the material. They are focused on the task and ask themselves: ‘How can I understand this?’ or ‘How can I do this?’ “With mastery goals students actively search their memory for relevant prior knowledge, such as content knowledge and metacognitive knowledge about the task and strategies, relevant for mastering the material. Moreover, they orient their regulatory processes to cues that provide information about their progress in learning. Thus, the pursuit of a mastery goal evokes engagement in metacognitive activities” (Vrught & Oort, 2008, p. 127). Can a standards-based grading platform set the stage for this type of engagement?

**Experiences with Standards-based Grading and the Development of Learner Behaviors**

Research on grading shows that in traditional grading practices, teachers include “academic enablers” such as effort, ability, work habits, attention and participation. When these behaviors are removed from a summary grade and they are reported separately from content achievement, it helps promote the development of these behaviors in students. It provides clarity for students in regards to their content knowledge while also providing specific feedback on the skills that 21st century learners need to be successful when presented with new and evolving content.
Schools that focus on developing assessment-capable visible learners, encourage students to reach beyond their current expectations. Student expectations of themselves are a powerful driver of learning. These students receive consistent messages about mastery of learning and standards-based grading can provide the specificity and clarity in the messaging. “When students know how to learn, it equips them to learn about concepts and skills they haven’t even dreamed of yet” (Frey, Hattie & Fisher, 2018, p.134).

Since the publication of John Hattie’s, *Visible Learning*, educators are continually searching for ways to take advantage of its transformative potential. In Hattie’s meta-analysis of over 800 studies that included over 70,000 participants, he provides a common expression for the magnitude of the impact specific practices have on student learning. He calls this the “effect size” ($d$) and when $d=1.0$ it indicates an increase of one standard deviation on the outcome of increasing student achievement. A 1.0 standard deviation is typically associated with advancing a student’s achievement by two to three years. Therefore, educational practices that have an effect size greater than zero indicate that they would be significant practices in enhancing achievement. The closer the effect size is to 1.0, the greater its positive influence on achievement. Table 2 summarizes studies related to specific teaching approaches and their relevant effect size on achievement.
The results reported by Hattie make it clear that when students know how to learn, they become their own teachers. Hattie describes this practice as visible learning and insists that it is driven by visible teaching. In a recent publication, *Developing Assessment-Capable Visible Learners*, the authors further support this claim by stating, “Students who become visible learners use feedback to develop learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment and self-teaching” (Frey, et al., 2018, p. 53).

Upon review of Table 2, it is evident that teaching strategies which align to the core philosophical building blocks of standards-based grading have remarkably high effect sizes. For example, strategies that emphasize learning intentions (goals) have an effect size of .56,

### Table 2
Summary of Information from the Meta-analyses on the Contributions from Teaching Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies emphasizing learning intentions</th>
<th>No. metas</th>
<th>No. studies</th>
<th>No. people</th>
<th>No. effects</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>CLE</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>41,342</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral organizers/advance organizers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>3,905</td>
<td>1,933</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept mapping</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>8,471</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning hierarchies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies emphasizing success criteria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery learning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>9,323</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller’s PIS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked examples</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3,324</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies emphasizing feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1,287</td>
<td>67,931</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency or effects of testing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>135,925</td>
<td>1,749</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching test taking and coaching</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>15,772</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing formative evaluation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3,835</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher immediacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5,437</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies emphasizing student perspectives in learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on task</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaced vs. massed practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>2,676</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>10,250</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies emphasizing student metacognitive/self-regulated learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-cognitive strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>5,028</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>29,311</td>
<td>2,217</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-verbalization/self-questioning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>3,098</td>
<td>1,150</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student control over learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aptitude-treatment interactions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1,434</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching style of learning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>29,911</td>
<td>1,218</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized instruction</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>9,380</td>
<td>1,146</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>7,559</td>
<td>386,353</td>
<td>16,020</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

strategies that emphasize success criteria (mastery learning) have an effect size of .58, strategies that emphasize feedback have an effect size of .73 and strategies that emphasize student meta-cognitive/self-regulated learning, have an effect size of .69.

When learners become the center of the educational focus the roles of teachers shift from delivery of information to providing opportunities for students to engage with ideas. “When thinking is made visible, we not only get a rear view look at what students are understanding, but a front seat view on how they are understanding it” (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011, p. 25). When teachers identify clearly articulated standards and scaffold success criteria for students, they can provide a road map for students to make their learning visible. The platform for learner autonomy is created when learning is visible to students as evidenced by the effect sizes on achievement. However, is setting the stage enough?

As Cizek (2000) warns, standards-based grading can be subject to the same hurdles as traditional grading. As an instructional leader, I too found the same dichotomy in my experiences. When discussing how students feel about standards-based grading, some students enthusiastically support the system and others vehemently dislike it. Although it is expected that any educational reform will have polarization, the naysayers seem to outnumber the supporters. This contradicts the plethora of research and literature that touts the benefits of standards-based grading. Even when teachers and administrators support its implementation, a divide between the theoretical perspectives and the reality of SBG seems to exist.

**Are Students Truly Reaping the Benefits of Standards-based Grading?**

Historically, grades represent the primary way that teachers provide students and parents with information on “how students are doing” in school and traditional grading is so ingrained in schooling that a great deal of trust is put into the message that a calculated number conveys.
As the instructional leader of Finlay Middle School, I wholeheartedly agree that reporting student achievement as one mark is an insufficient way to provide valuable information on a student’s overall learning progress and growth. Also, I philosophically align with the following, “Students benefit from believing that intelligence and capacity increase with effort and that mistakes and failures are opportunities for self-inquiry and growth rather than indictments of worth or ability” (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012, p. 10). Despite my perceptions and the fact that the intent of SBG is to clarify communication on learning and foster a culture of self-direction and growth, I worry that students may not reap, or even understand, its benefits.

The preponderance of research on the benefits of standards-based grading would suggest that students and parents would embrace and vehemently support the change. Unfortunately, after altering our grading system, some students’ prior beliefs, perceptions and familiarization with traditional grading practices overshadow the benefits of the new grading system. In the article, Classic Mistakes in Grading Reform and How to Avoid Them (2020), Guskey shares that stakeholders’ concerns are not so much about the what that is changing, but the why it needs to change. Students don’t understand the complications or pitfalls of traditional grade reporting. In order for SBG reform to be successful, stakeholders need to understand the why and educational leaders should be sensitive to the loss of security, the anxiety and the discomfort that accompany established grading traditions (Guskey, 2020).

This phenomenon was highlighted in a mixed methods study by Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller and Townsley (2017) in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in the form of Likert-style responses and open-ended responses. The following qualitative questions were used: What do you see as the biggest weakness/disadvantage of standards-based
grading? What do you see as the next biggest weakness/disadvantage of standards-based grading? And if I could change one thing about standards-based grading, it would be?

The researchers focused on these three responses as they sought to understand students’ resistance to standards-based grading. The themes that emerged indicated that students were most concerned with a) the SBG implementation process, b) grading issues, c) preparation for university and future employment, d) social issues and e) issues related to current teaching, learning and motivation. Some students indicated that it was much harder to get an “A” (4 points on a 4-point scale) and they shared that they disliked that homework was not calculated into their final grade. Other students disparaged the replacement of scores if a new score was lower than the previous score. Students also expressed concern with how SBG relates to their long-term goals and that the system does not prepare them for college grading systems. Finally, although some students noted an increase in clarity in expectations, others indicated that they don’t really know what they need to do to get better (Kruse, et al. 2017).

“The most important aspect of grading is how much students gain from their learning experiences” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 65). Therefore, it is concerning that both my experience with implementing a standards-based grading system and a review of the research suggests that students may not be reaping the theoretical benefits of SBG. For example, one study revealed that there was a significant misalignment between a student’s understanding of what their grade meant and the reality of the grading practices. The researcher suggested that this was due to grading practices not yet aligning enough to the student’s belief system on grading (Thiele, 2018). Conversely, specific research by Knight & Cooper (2019) suggests that “despite an initial implementation dip, SBG makes teaching clearer, more purposeful, and more
conducive to student needs while enhancing student growth mind-set and ownership” (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 65).

After two years of implementation at the junior high level, are students still struggling with aligning standards-based grading to their core beliefs on grading? Or, have we gotten over the proverbial dip in implementation, mind-sets are changing and the system is supporting growth with both academic achievement and learner attributes? Students are entitled to feedback on their strengths and areas of improvement in a way that is useful, productive and motivating. Although a body of research supports the fact that comprehensive standards-based grading systems facilitate clearer, more targeted feedback in comparison to traditional systems, there is a lack of research on student’s perspectives of its value.

**Students’ Perspectives, Addressing a Gap in the Research**

“Assuming that people think or feel a specific way is not a productive strategy when implementing systemic change” (Heflebower, et al., 2014, p. 101). “A person’s way of knowing or meaning-making system, is the lens through which all experiences are filtered- it is the lens through which a person sees the world and actively interprets it” (Drago-Severson, Blum-Stefano & Asghar, 2013, p. 57). As a building principal, have I assumed that I understand how students are feeling about the change in grading practices? Have I done enough to provide the right lens through which students view the purpose of grading?

Susan Brookhart (2004) completed a review of literature on grading practices and discussed the findings relative to evaluation and motivational theory. She reviewed a total of nineteen studies that centered on grading practices and term level grade reporting. Upon review of her summaries (which included their theoretical frameworks, subjects, methods and findings) none of the studies directly included student input or their perspectives on the value of
SBG. Although the literature on grading and assessment practices spans multiple theoretical frameworks, such as educational psychology, learning theories, best practice pedagogy and student motivation, there fails to be an abundance of research that focuses specifically on the students’ perspectives of standards-based grading and whether or not it impacts the development of 21st century learner attributes.

Furthermore, few studies of secondary standards-based grading practices have been reported in the last decade. Even less studied has been school or district wide initiatives intended to reform grading and move away from traditional practices. The educational field would benefit from increased attention to students’ perspectives of the change. This aligns to Patton’s position on utilization-focused evaluation, “evaluation done for, and with, specific intended primary users and for specific intended purposes” (Patton, 2008, p. 39). A constructivist, interpretive paradigm guides this study as it strives to describe the effects that standards-based grading has on one of the primary users of the system. Just as standard-based grading’s purpose is to provide clarity on learning, students’ stories may provide clarity to district leaders and classroom teachers on how to best help them reap the theorized benefits of standards-based grading.

“To succeed in tearing down the many old traditions associated with grading, we must have new traditions to take their place. We must ensure that those new traditions are based on solid evidence of their effectiveness. In particular, we must be certain that our new traditions support student learning and enhance students' perceptions of themselves as competent learners” (Guskey, 2015, p. 6).
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

The purpose of this section is to describe the methodology, research design and procedures that were used for this study. This section also describes the ways in which the research design was carried through the study, the population sample identified for the research and the analysis procedures.

According to Patton (2008), evaluations have many potential stakeholders and there can be an array of possible uses for an evaluation. With the inception of standards-based grading at both the middle and high school levels, teachers, parents and students have been working to transition their practices, mindset and expectations from traditional grading practices. Theoretically, standards-based grading is widely supported by research as a positive influence on student learning and growth. It can serve as the avenue through which students can become stewards of their own learning and help students develop twenty-first century learner attributes. However, in practice, it is difficult to know if students understand, and can implement, its benefits. “Utilization-focused evaluation requires moving from the general and abstract to the real and specific: actual primary intended users” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). Therefore, the stakeholders in this evaluation are the students, as they are the primary users and the focus of this study will be on their perspectives regarding standards-based grading. Distilling out the end users’ perspectives on the generalized benefits of implementing standards-based grading will provide deeper understandings that can inform professional practice, assessment development and district policy. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), “the unit of analysis, not the topic of the investigation, characterizes a case study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38). Therefore, I implemented a qualitative case study through the use of student interviews. The students were
the unit of analysis to examine the function of standards-based grading in enhancing twenty-first century learner attributes.

**Participants**

The participants were Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School students who have experienced both traditional grading practices and standards-based grading practices at the secondary level (grades 8-12). The participants had varying years of experience with standards-based grading ranging from one to four years of experience. All students had attended Finlay Middle School and were current students of Lincoln High School. These particular participants had experience with both traditional and standards-based grading systems at the secondary level. This experience allowed them to answer comparative questions regarding both grade reporting systems and provide rich descriptions of their experiences with each.

An attempt was made to include students that represented the academic levels and diverse cultural backgrounds of the learning community. The resulting pool of sixteen students was comprised of eleven male students and five female students. Various ethnicities and cultures were represented, including ten Caucasian students, one Hispanic student, two Black students, two Asian students and one Eastern European student. Furthermore, two students had individual educational plans (IEPs) and three students were in an accelerated pathway that provided them access to honors and advanced placement courses.

**Data Gathering Techniques**

The type of qualitative data that was gathered came from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the researcher, myself, as the interviewer. Pre-determined questions provided a common platform from which clarifying questions that deepened understanding were asked. Being able to clarify questions helped with reducing question interpretation and aided in
clarification of students’ perceptions. Additionally, Patton (2008) states that “situational responsiveness should guide the interactive process between evaluator and primary intended users” (Patton 2008, p. 38). Therefore, questions that delved deeper, clarified students’ comments, and sought true understanding were used.

The use of direct face-to-face interviews was selected because according to Bloomberg & Volpe (2019), “A benefit of collecting data through individual, in-depth interviews is that they offer the potential to capture a person’s perspective of an event or experience” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 193). To enhance the credibility of the process, all interviews were audio taped, transcribed via Temi software and coded through the use of Dedoose.

Archival data from learning community surveys was reviewed to provide a baseline understanding of perceptions and help develop interview questions. To gather user feedback and monitor progress of the implementation of standards-based grading, central office staff surveyed parents, students and teachers regarding their understandings and perceptions. This information was collected at the end of the first and second years of implementation. The survey included Likert scale questions and short answer questions centered on perceived program strengths and weaknesses. As the principal of Finlay Middle School, I was given permission to access and review the qualitative and quantitative data collected during these survey opportunities. I incorporated both the qualitative survey information and the quantitative Likert scale information from the archival data into my analysis of current conditions, context and culture. As indicated by Patton, “the greater the number of supporting sources for lessons learned, the more confidence one has in the significance and meaningfulness of the lesson learned” (Patton, 2008, p. 136).
Ethical Considerations

The research complied to the institutional standards of conducting research with human subjects. An informed consent form for parents and an assent form for students were used that made both students, and parents, aware of the purpose of the research, the procedures, foreseeable risks and the potential benefits to the learning community. Parental permission was obtained for participants under the age of eighteen.

Participants were voluntary and a statement indicating this was shared with students and parents. Additionally, an explanation that refusal to participate will not result in any consequences or any loss of benefits was included. Participants were aware of their right to confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Consent documents were clearly written and the language used was grade-level appropriate and educational terms such as 21st century learner attributes, formative assessments, summative assessments and standards-based grading will be explained.

All collected data was reported in aggregate and any information or labels used to identify individuals was removed. Potential risks to the participants were mitigated by keeping all interview transcripts and coding sheets confidential. Participant names were replaced with alphanumeric labels, and only I had access to the audio recordings on a password protected personal device. Participants were given the choice to opt out at any time.

The potential benefits of the data collection were significant for students. The program evaluation provided them with a unique opportunity to voice their perceptions and opinions about the grading system. It also provided them with an opportunity to think deeply about and respond to their experiences. This interaction helped to clarify the intentions of standards-based grading and possibly influence their overall perceptions in a positive way. Furthermore, student
feedback can contribute to improvements in the execution of a standards-based grading system in a way that is beneficial for all students.

**Data Analysis**

The theoretical framework of my data analysis will be constructivist in nature, to make sense out of the data collected by consolidating and interpreting what participants have said and what I have observed and read. To facilitate the finding of patterns, or themes, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via software. As suggested by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), the actual names for themes or categories came from three sources: “1. the researcher, 2. the participants’ exact words and 3. sources outside the study such as literature” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 211). Additionally, the categories met several criteria, including: “responsiveness to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive and sensitivity to capturing the meaning of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 212). The transcriptions were reviewed for themes or categories that not only adhered to these criteria but also captured the recurring patterns in the data that relate back to the purpose and research questions of the study. An open coding strategy was used to identify general themes from the interview responses. Further review of the transcriptions elicited sub-themes, or categories.

**Conclusion**

“Individuals construct reality through interaction with their social worlds, constructivism thus underlies qualitative studies” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This qualitative case study was constructivist in nature as I was interested in how students interpreted the standards-based grading processes and what meaning they could attribute to their experiences. According to Guskey and Jung (2008), a standard based grading and reporting system is more about communicating better and more accurate information to families and students in order to provide
the basis for improving student learning. Whether or not this leads to specific improvements depends not on the information itself but on how that information is used (Guskey & Jung, 2008). With this said, the hope is that the information collected and the subsequent findings from this study will align to Patton’s rationale for program evaluation: “to inform decisions, clarify options, identify improvements and provide information about programs and policies within contextual boundaries” (Patton, 2008, p. 40).
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

With the inception of standards-based grading at both the middle and high school levels, teachers, parents and students have been working to transition their practices, mindset and expectations from traditional grading practices. Theoretically, standards-based grading is widely supported by research as a positive influence on student learning and growth. It can serve as the avenue through which students can become stewards of their own learning and help students develop twenty-first century learner attributes. However, in practice, it is difficult to know if students understand, and can implement, its benefits. “Utilization-focused evaluation requires moving from the general and abstract to the real and specific: actual primary intended use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). Therefore, the stakeholders in this evaluation were the students, as they were the primary users and the focus of this study was on their perspectives regarding standards-based grading. Chapter four summarizes the findings from student interviews centered on the following questions: what are the attitudes and experiences of secondary students impacted by a standards-based grading system? Are students reaping the benefits of standards-based grading processes in regards to development of 21st century learner attributes such as self-directed learning, self-reflection, growth mindset?

Sixteen students with varying experience levels with standards-based grading, ethnicities, genders and learning pathways participated in face-to-face interviews. Student responses were recorded, transcribed and an open-coding process produced three general themes; 21st century learner attributes, strengths and areas to improve. Further analysis of students’
responses required construction of sub-themes, or categories, that captured recurring patterns in the data. The themes and sub-themes are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Themes and Sub-Themes Identified in Student Interviews on Standards-based Grading*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Sub-Themes Identified in Student Interviews on Standards-based Grading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Continual improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focused learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicating with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Understanding expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Strengths of Standards-based Grading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Holistic understanding of learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individualized pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supports emotional well-being by reducing pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fosters teacher-student collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not just learning, but also about growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engaging with content on deeper levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Detailed feedback on learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communication with parents is skill based, not percentages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3: Areas to Improve in Standards-based grading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher competency and consistency across classrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ambiguity in learning expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Progress monitoring and feedback on learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Broadness of middle proficiency level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to attain highest level of performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent misunderstandings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing a growth mindset in parents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The 4C’s Framework**

Developing an understanding of a system from multiple dimensions enhances the ability of organizations to create a momentum of change that is both proactive and purposeful. As suggested by Wagner et al. (2006) in *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide for Transforming Our Schools*, thinking systematically by understanding organizations and individuals as systems allows one to keep the whole in mind while being aware of the interrelationships among the components. Wagner provides a framework for understanding the interrelated elements of the change process in schools and districts while confronting increasing accountability. When
thinking systematically about the challenges and goals of change, Wagner suggests “focusing on the 4 C’s (competency, conditions, culture and context) while keeping the goal of improving teaching and learning at the center of the work” (Wagner et al. p. 98).

The sections that follow use Wagner’s 4C’s to explain students’ perspectives on the conditions that surround the implementation of a standards-based grading and reporting process at the secondary level. Figure 3 is an overview of how sub-themes, that emerged from student responses, are related to each of Wagner’s 4C’s and it presents the order in which the areas are further discussed.

Figure 3

*Sub-Themes and their Relationship to Context, Culture, Conditions & Competencies*
The data and findings offered rich insight to students’ perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of a standards-based grading system and how it helps cultivate learner attributes such as self-assessment, self-regulation and overall growth in learning. Responses were summarized and paraphrased to provide a general understanding of students’ perspectives. The results and conclusions distill out the end users’ perspectives on the generalized benefits of implementing standards-based grading and provide a deeper understanding that will inform professional practice, assessment development and district policy which will be further discussed in chapter five.

**Findings Part I: Context**

Wagner et al. (2006) explains that context references the skill demands of the entire learning community. Context provides an overview of the broad, and diverse, realities of students, teachers and parents. Additionally, it encompasses culture, conditions and competencies of a system and provides an overarching understanding of the system as a whole.

As discussed in chapter one, students at Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School continually outperform their peers, both locally and nationally, on standardized assessments. Students come to school ready to learn, and parents insist on high quality, rigorous experiences for their children. The entire learning community takes great pride when students receive very visual indicators of their success. High competition exists between individual learners and within the entire learning community. Grades are used by students and their families to establish a certain *position* in the perceived order of schooling. Therefore, the community places a great deal of value on traditional grading practices; the presentation of a number on a hundred-point scale and the ultimate calculation of a grade point average (GPA).
Additionally, the student population of the district is rich in racial and ethnic diversity with over 50% of the population being non-white students, many who have moved internationally and have parents whose jobs require the family to move globally. This creates a situation in which learner mobility is high across nations, across the country and into highly selective private schools. Families expect that grading information be provided to other institutions in a traditional format of percentiles and GPAs as this information is more easily transferable to other educational contexts. Families also prefer progress reports and final grades to be provided in a format that is more familiar to them. A student sympathizes with parents and confirms this perspective by stating, “There's a lot of parents that come from other countries and have not had the American educational experience... it's just hard, even the American parents don’t understand what's going on”.

In general, the students at Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School are high achieving from an academic context but a continued area of growth is the development of learner behaviors such as collaboration, resiliency and the development of a growth mindset. The district’s vision planning includes a very purposeful focus on the development of 21st century learner attributes such as perseverance and adaptability. Community members of the vision planning committee, outwardly support the development of these skills and have high expectations for them to be embedded into the curriculum.

During the interview process, the following was shared with students, “Educational research suggests that a standards-based grading system can help students learn how to learn and to use 21st century learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-teaching. What is your perspective on whether or not standards-based grading impacts the
development of these skills”? Students were further asked, “How do you think that will translate to college and potentially to a profession”?

63% of the students were able to articulate skills and learner attributes that they acquired through their experiences with SBG. Students discussed being self-aware, knowing if they are studying correctly, valuing communication with their teachers, being self-directed and understanding in what areas they excel and in what areas they need to improve.

A student poignantly summarized the impact of SBG on the development of 21st century learner attributes by stating, “I think those skills are something that I've actually really found value in, I think that it is a big benefit of standard-based grading”. They further explained how the skills will translate to college and a career, “Just being self-aware, always just trying to be better would make me more successful in any situation. I guess it taught me a good work ethic and just a good way to monitor myself and make sure I'm staying on track”. Another student shared this same sentiment by stating, “There’s a lot of reflection in standards-based grading that did not exist before. It has really helped me become more conscious of my habits, my strengths and my weaknesses as a learner, which will obviously help me outside of school”.

Kay & Greenhill (2013) suggest that educational supports that foster 21st century skill development include students being active participants in recording and understanding their classroom performance and using this understanding to guide and refine their work (Kay & Greenhill, 2013). 89% of the students provided responses that confirmed the idea that standards-based grading is an educational support that helps promote the development of 21st century learner attributes. This is evidenced by the paraphrased responses in Table 3.
### Table 3

**Students’ Perceptions of the Impact of Standards-Based Grading on the Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“Now I know exactly what I need to do and what I need to have done. It’s more responsibility for me”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I'm glad I've had the experience because I've noticed that it's a lot easier for me to master skills. Probably because of the communication and the reflection and there's also a lot of room for growth. Those skills are something that I've actually really found value in and I think that's a big benefit of standard-based grading”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It's taught me lessons on communication and staying accountable for my grades. I'd say I do feel prepared and I'm confident going to college”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“My experience with SBG has shown me if you don't do well, it's your choice to re-perform or do more evidence. It's really up to you when you look at your standards, if you are going to focus on a certain standard or you're just going to ignore it. I think one of the biggest things it shows you if you're studying wrong. If I consistently get a two and a standard wrong, but I'm studying, it definitely makes me more aware of how I'm preparing and what I'm doing”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“Being accountable and understanding how each teacher grades, reading their syllabus and understanding it. I think those 21st century skills have been helpful and SBG has helped with that. I'd say it definitely helped me grow in that area”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“With SBG, there's no percentages. You have to use your own time to see what your grade is, how you can improve, what categories you need to improve, it teaches you to be more self-directed”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think the way that standard-based grading offers this space, where you can conference with your teacher, you're filling out forms and reflecting. What will I do for the next test? What did I get wrong here? How can I ask my teacher for guidance with that? I think that's an important skill that standard based grading has opened the door to”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“I still attribute a big part of my grade to doing the homework even if it isn’t counting for a grade. I do recognize that it's really important for my learning. I'm more likely to do it because I need to, in order to do well on the summative tests.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“SBG helps me develop an understanding of what my skill set is, in sort of an asset and a liability system. assets, I would devote less time to. On the other hand, if there was a skill set that I identified as being a liability, I would devote a considerable amount of time towards improving that skill”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“Since there's written standards, I think it's more specific. With regular grading, like on a math test, I would just get an 80%, but with SBG I can see what I'm actually good at or what I need to work on. It's just more specific and you just know what you need to work on”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two students had perspectives that differed from most, regarding SBG’s effects on the development of 21st century learner attributes. On student shared, “I would respond that I personally am a very traditional learner. I require feedback in the form of a punishment and a measurable reward for how I've done on a particular day. I respond fairly well to that. To that end, I would say I've never really gotten behind SBG, I've understood the purpose of it, but I've never really gotten behind it or agreed that it would necessarily help me as a student and as a learner. Personally, I disagree”.

Another student shared a similar sentiment about SBG’s impact on 21st century learner attributes when compared to traditional grading. He expresses, “I don't really see a difference. I honestly treat SBG and traditional grading the exact same way, in terms of my priority systems and the way that I learn; nothing's really changed for me”.

**Findings Part II: Culture**

Wagner & et al. (2006) defines culture as “the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school” (Wagner, et.al., 2006, p. 102). The following section provides insight into the invisible, but powerful, mindsets of the learning community and how it impacts the overall culture of understanding.

**Parents’ experiences with grading and a fixed mindset hamper understanding.** Most students and parents believe, and assume, that grades are used to sort and select students for different academic programs. They expect that the grading structure provides rank and order. This is understandable as the parents of current secondary students experienced traditional grading in their own educational experience and it is a deeply rooted tradition in families that is evident across all cultures. Parents and students understand traditional grading and find
frustration in interpreting a standards-based grading system. 50% of the students disclosed that their parent’s lack of understanding regarding the purpose and benefits of standards-based grading has created a culture of frustration as students find it difficult to talk about grades with parents. A female student suggested, “They're starting to understand, but it's hard for them to realize that it's okay. I may have done bad in the beginning, but it's fine, I have time to do better. It's just a lot harder to explain to them and make it seem like I'm not doing as bad as it appears”.

Furthermore, the culture of the learning community is defined by high achieving students that do well at school, doing whatever it takes to get the best grade. A fixed mindset permeates the learning community as families simply want students to perform and achieve at the highest academic levels. A male student confirms this by sharing, “With SBG, you don't really get free points and you don't really get points for doing assignments like homework, my parents don’t understand it”. A female student explains that parents perceive SBG as being “risky” because parents are uncomfortable with instruction and assessment being centered on growth towards broader learning standards and they are uneasy with the perceived ambiguity of standards-based grading. A male student confirms this perspective by stating, “I don't think they understand the growth part of the system” and another student simply states “definitely not” when asked if his parents understand the system.

Parents believe that the assignment of a number to indicate achievement more clearly ranks their child’s performance relative to their peers. There is a perceived rigor with traditional grading when compared to standards-based grading as a student explains, “With traditional grading, you can get so addicted to that one decimal point, that one percentage you're off and your parents would obsess over it”. Another student shares, “they definitely don't understand, it's
hard for them to realize that if I did bad in the beginning, it's fine, I can do better and I am not doing as bad as it shows right now”.

**Standards-based grading supports emotional well-being and a growth mindset.** Conversely, it was interesting to find that students felt less pressured about learning because parents could not quantify their learning down to the hundredth of a percentile. Overall, students expressed that they were relieved that they had time to grow and their parents were less involved in the daily monitoring of their achievement. A female student reveals that “SBG gives the student time to not be so pressured by their parents. My parents would see a 1% drop and they would wonder what are you doing? With SBG it's different, they will wait to look at your end grade. Learning takes time and parents should understand that; SBG puts less tension between families and the student”. Additionally, students shared a sense of relief and a “lifted burden” as standards-based grading helped foster a growth mindset, a culture of being allowed to make mistakes.

When stress and competition thrive in a high achieving school such as Finlay Middle School, a fixation on rank, order and comparison to others can negatively impact the emotional well-being of students. It was unexpected when students talked about the positive impacts SBG can have on their overall emotional well-being. Students reported feeling valued, less burdened by meaningless tasks, and relieved that a continual calculation of points and fixation on a number no longer existed. A student revealed that when percentages, with decimals, were removed it created a classroom environment that “didn’t divide students” and eliminated the pressure of comparison to classmates and the stress of wondering if they were “smart enough”. Paraphrased student responses in Table 4 further support how SBG reduces student pressures and encourages a growth mindset.
Table 4

*Students’ Perspectives on SBG, Emotional Well-Being and a Growth Mindset*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think it (SBG) definitely has motivated me. For example, my biology class was traditional grading, I really struggled in that class and when the semester was coming to a close, I was extremely burnt out and lost hope in terms of my grade... I can't do anything… so I just sat there. In standard-based grading, I feel like my work is more valued because they're looking at the whole thing”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“SBG takes some of the burden off of the students and allows the students to make mistakes, to continually improve throughout the semester or the year without as much stress caused by one particular setback that might drop your grade like in the traditional system”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“I think a strength for a standards-based grading system is that it takes the burden of the workload off of students instead of trying to cram in every bit of the subjects…. instead, you can specifically put your effort into the one area of the subject that you may be struggling”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think it's been really helpful in high school. honestly, all schools should look into it because I think it offers students kind of this like sense of relief in that there's just not one grade taking them down and it feels like a weight on your shoulders the whole semester”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It’s not like, I got 92.5, you got a 93. SBG doesn’t put a divide in students. It’s pure pressure on students wondering if they are smart enough because of a half of a percent. I think removing that stress was a big thing, especially for me”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“If I was having a bad day on that homework, the homework doesn't affect the entire grade, so it makes it less stressful”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One student felt differently about the relationship between SBG and emotional well-being. He shared, “I think it made me a little more anxious. With regular grading, I had more control because I could bump it up 2% by doing whatever, and I know exactly what I need, SBG just is not as clear, it's just a lot of gray area”.

**Standards-based grading considers the whole student and their learning pace.**

Many students expressed that traditional grading systems could “sink” a student and create a situation in which they were feeling unmotivated as they tried to counteract the effects of one bad assessment on their overall course grade. Conversely, SBG provided the platform for students to learn and demonstrate understanding at their own pace. Several students
explained that SBG considers the student’s entire body of work and indicated that it is a more wholesome picture of what they know and are able to do. Generally, students indicated that SBG reduced the pressure on them, providing them hope that they can master the learning standard in time and making them feel valued as learners. This is supported by student responses in Table 5.

Table 5

Students’ Perspectives: SBG Considers the Whole Student and Their Learning Pace.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“Standard based grading, is more of a wholesome picture of the student rather than.. here's one bad test grade, it's an outlier, but it's bringing everything down and there's no way to get out of that”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think it puts less pressure on me because I know that when the teacher puts the grades in at the end of the semester, they're looking at the whole trend of everything I've done from August to December or December to May. It's not like I’m constantly trying to lift myself out of something that I did in August”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I feel like there is more of an emphasis on us learning and us meeting those standards”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“Someone can learn the subject really well and have strength in it and pass the class. But someone who initially has a weaker understanding of the subject can also pass the class. It's not like they'll have a worse grade because they had a worse start”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It definitely has motivated me. For example, my biology class that was traditional, I really struggled in that class and by the time the semester was coming to a close, I was extremely burnt out and kind of lost hope in terms of...this is my grade, I can't do anything. Whereas in standard-based grading, I feel almost more valued because they're looking at the whole thing”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings Part III: Conditions

Wagner et. al (2006), defines conditions as the “external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangements of time, space and resources” (Wagner, et al.,2006, p. 101). The external architecture of the learning community is characterized by highly educated families that have the resources to support their children in all aspects of their education and parents intervene when necessary. A high percentage of students from Finlay Middle School and
Lincoln High School are bound for elite post-secondary options and families expect that secondary curriculum, assessment and grade reporting support these long-term goals. In some cases, standards-based grading has made it difficult for parents to know how their children are performing and when they should intervene. A student confirms this when he shared, “It's just so unclear. Parents get upset because they don't know how their kids are doing”.

However, some students shared that their conversations with parents have transitioned from talking about percentages to talking about focus areas in learning. When a student was asked whether or not he would talk to his parents about areas of improvement with the traditional grading system, he stated, “Not really, I was more worried about getting the overall grade than the specifics of the concepts”. He further shared a conversation he had with his parents that highlights a strength of standards-based grading, “In my sophomore year of Spanish, I had a three for interpersonal speaking going into the final. I told my parents that I was going to focus on preparing for interpersonal speaking and nothing else for the final because I already had evidence for the other areas”.

**Student and teacher communication.** High value is placed on teacher, student and parent communication that centers on student learning. Although parents are learning how to interpret SBG reporting, 56% of the students shared how SBG fostered an increase in communication and collaboration with their teachers. A valuable caveat that supports the worth of the students’ perspectives is the fact that they were not asked this question directly during the interview; students shared this perspective without being prompted.

Students explained that standards-based grading offers the space in which teacher and student collaboration can occur. Rather than accepting a final percentage on an assignment, students focused on the details of the learning standard and accompanying rubrics. Conversations
about learning happened organically in the SBG arena when students were provided written feedback detailing strengths and areas of improvement. One-on-one conferences with teachers and self-reflection also offered students opportunities to clarify learning expectations and inform future work. Even one student, who preferred a traditional grading system, shared, “The one thing I have taken away from SBG is communication skills with my teacher”. Table 6 summarizes students’ perspectives on the role of SBG and enhanced student-teacher communication on learning.

**Table 6**

*Students’ Perspectives on Teacher-Student Communication & Collaboration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It (SBG) shows you the exact category and most of the time the teachers would put the exact thing you need to work on, they just don’t put numbers in the grade book, they put a number with a nice little paragraph next to it that tells you what you need to do, it gives you information to improve”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think the way that standard-based grading offers this space, where you can conference with your teacher, you’re filling out forms and reflecting. What will I do for the next test? What did I get wrong here? How can I ask my teacher for guidance with that? I think that’s an important skill that standard based grading has opened the door to”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“I’ve been more proactive and being like, can you walk me through what Approaching means”?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Male   | “With SBG we do actual conferences with the teachers about what we need to work on”.
| Male   | “Teachers don’t waste their time with stuff you already know. They give you the exact thing that you don’t know and you can focus your time on what you actually need to work on”.
| Male   | “If I am struggling on a standard, I pinpoint that and I meet with my teacher and talk about it, I like the focus on that”.
| Female | “At the end of every semester, my teachers will sit us down and talk about how we did that semester and if there’s anything we can do. It helps me prioritize, prioritize what I need to study”.

One student recognized how SBG can impact a teacher's ability to give timely feedback. Although they appreciated the conferencing and written feedback, they shared that in some cases, “Students would turn in a test and then three weeks later, they would get it
back. They forgot everything about what they wrote and it takes time to remember. The comments were really elaborate from the teacher, but I forgot what I wrote exactly and at that point you feel like it doesn't matter”.

**Findings Part IV: Competencies**

Wagner et al. (2006), explains competencies as “the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning” (Wagner, et al., 2006, p.99). Competencies that affect the impact of standards-based grading need to be understood from three lenses; parent competency, student competency and staff competency.

Parents continue to struggle with understanding, interpreting and aligning to the philosophies of SBG. Parents simply don’t “get it”. To no fault of their own, the competency of parents regarding understanding standards-based grading is marginal at best. However, 81% of the students shared that they understand its value and indicated that they are engaging with content at deeper levels and focusing on their growth as learners. Students see the value in how they can use standards-based grading feedback to guide their growth through remediation and/or enrichment. Furthermore, they talk about evidence of learning and understand that classroom activities, practice and assessments all serve as wellness checks on their learning and are not intended to be post-mortem reports like they were traditional grading. A growth mindset prevails in an SBG system which is evidenced by the continued mention of growth in students’ responses.

**In a standards-based grading system learning centers on growth over time.** A fascinating theme that emerged during student interviews was when 100% of the students talked about growth. In a high performing district, it is usual for students to talk about and compare themselves to peers relative to achievement; it was enlightening to hear students talk
about growing as learners especially when growth was not a focus of the interview questions. Students confirmed feeling as though their learning experience was personalized to their learning abilities. They understood, and felt their teachers understood, that learning takes time and occurs at different rates. 75% of the students used the word “growth” when describing their experiences and valued that a final level of proficiency in a subject area was determined by a collection of evidence over time. A grade is based on improvement and not just points; teachers don’t focus on what you know at the moment. This is evidenced by the paraphrased quotes in Table 7.

Table 7

*Students’ Perspectives: Standards-based Grading Supports Growth Over Time*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Male   | “An example is writing. You can get an approaching, but you have time to grow, it is equally balanced. On the next essay if you get a meets, your grade goes up to meeting. It means you are growing in your writing”.
| Female | “SBG gives you more time to learn and improve from the start, it helps you. Your grade is based on improvement and not points. You can mess up once but still show you understand the material later on”.
| Female | “That's what I particularly like about SBG... it's a more accurate picture of how a student has trended throughout the semester”.
| Male   | “With SBG, I have a better understanding of everything and then I show growth. For example, last year in physics, I was struggling for a semester and then going into the second semester, I started putting in more effort and showing all 3’s across the board. I just feel like you're given more of a chance to prove yourself”.
| Female | “I guess the growth thing can be really beneficial because if I don't understand something, I have the opportunity to show that I do understand it by the end of the semester”.
| Male   | “They (teachers) don’t focus on if you know the material at that moment, they just want you to be able to show growth”.
| Male   | “I think SBG definitely lets people know where they need to work, what they need to work on and what they need to do to grow on specific topics”.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“With SBG, you may make a small error on the test and you can retake that portion. Your teacher wants you to show extra evidence so they can see growth in you”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“SBG really helps you grow a lot more than traditional grading. You don't get so obsessed over each exam, but see your overall growth and can see, I am doing better! It's not like, 'Oh, I made a mistake and that’s it.'”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although most students used the word “growth” at some point in the discussion, 44% of the students were uncomfortable with the uncertainty of growth. Will they make it to the target expectation in time? Are they growing at a rate that is expected? What indicators are being used to confirm growth? The lack of clearly articulated success criteria and quality feedback on progress in learning continues to create a condition of ambiguity and discomfort with the system. Students reported that ambiguity, relative to the rate of growth, plays into the overall misunderstanding of the grading system. 44% of the students shared that they were unsure whether or not they were growing at a rate that would get them to mastery of the standard by the end of the term or year. The following examples validate these concerns.

A student revealed, “I've had a lingering feeling during some point in the semester, I was very unsure about what's going on with my grades. I wasn’t able to predict where I was, or what my grade was going to be at the end of the semester.” Another student shared a similar perspective by stating, “Sometimes it is difficult to see progress until you are actually there”. A high achieving student hoping to attend an Ivy League school, shared that standards-based grading is riskier in terms of knowing if you are going to grow enough to meet a standard. She stated, “I get it's about growth. It's where you're going, not necessarily where you are at this moment and that it is a little more “risky”. Another student supported SBG’s focus on learning and growth but highlighted the ambiguity of it by stating, “I have never understood what progress or what progress markers teachers were using to determine measurements of
growth”. A student who prefers traditional grading over standards-based grading, offered his perspective on the system, “I like the idea of being able to focus a student's efforts on learning, as opposed to just receiving a letter grade. I think that's an important and very valuable transformation that's being pursued, but I think in execution, the result is ultimately the same”.

Furthermore, some students expressed frustration when teachers focused on growing students over momentary achievement. For example, a student explains, “Sometimes teachers use it (growth) the wrong way. You might understand the material but you will get an approaching because you need to show growth by the end of the year. The teachers don’t focus on the fact that you know the material now, they just want to be able to show that you have grown”. Another student confirms this feeling by sharing, “Some teachers use it the wrong way. On a recent exam most people had an approaching, everyone emailed and asked about the low grade. The teacher told us we need to be able to show growth. She said our grade will move up at the end, but for now we will keep it here”. A third student adds their perspective by stating, “Sometimes teachers use it in the wrong way. You can understand the material but you will get a two right now. The teachers say you need to show growth by the end of the year. They don’t focus on the fact that you know the material; they just want to be able to show growth”.

A student summarizes his frustration with the perceived subjectivity by stating, “I have often felt as if too much power is given to the teacher to determine who is making progress along what lines and according to whose standards that results in the meeting of, I would say highly, highly subjective grades”. This perspective is confirmed when a separate student revealed, “It is hard to know where you are at, a lot of it feels like it's up to the
Standards-based grading leads to deeper levels of learning. When discussing the benefits of standards-based grading, 56% of the students expressed that it provided the platform for them to engage in content in a meaningful way that leads to deeper levels of learning. Rather than focusing on the rote memorization of content, students realized that the expectations of the learning standards had them interact with content at deeper levels; not just learning discrete skills but conceptually understanding the curriculum. Additionally, when penalties were removed for initial attempts or practice such as homework, students felt valued and they appreciated the autonomy in making decisions around how they prioritized their time. Overall, students understand that standards-based grading isn’t about completion of tasks, but about true learning of the content. This is evidenced in students’ responses in Table 8.
Table 8

Students’ Perspectives on how Standards-based Grading Promotes Deeper Engagement with Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“One of the bigger strengths is that SBG focuses more directly on curriculum and content. I’d say decreasing the focus on more menial and arbitrary things, like participation or homework. I think it allows students to take more of a focus directly into the course content and the things that are necessary to be successful”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“It's sort of like preparation for being able to directly engage with coursework in a more meaningful way rather than having to worry about, I didn't do this homework and now I have a zero in the homework category”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I feel like there is more of an emphasis on us actually learning, us meeting those standards. I'd say that I have appreciated how it has more emphasis on that”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think SBG has helped me more conceptually, whereas the traditional grading system is more task based. I feel like with SBG, it went from multiple choice questions in science to claim evidence and reasoning. Here's the evidence now show me what you can do with it, what’s your conclusion? It's not just memorizing stuff like Newton's three laws; we have to think with our own head now. It really taught me how to have my own ideas and creative thoughts and explain them instead of just formulas”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“Standards based grading is more conceptual, like are you a good investigator or how are your mathematical skills and then growing those”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“With SBG they focus more on trying to help me with the concept. I need to learn more than just completing tasks, like doing the homework”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think I am more aware of how I’m doing on a math skill or a writing skill and I try to better those skills versus understanding the curriculum words. I'd say SBG has helped me in that”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“Before when homework was really required, it was mostly completing the homework just to complete it. Now when I know I need to work on something, I'll just put extra work into that specific concept or topic. It helps with recognizing what I need to work on and having the ability to just focus on the specific ones I need to master... instead of just doing it all just to complete it”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variability in teacher competency & implementation results in ambiguity. The competency level of most teachers relative to SBG implementation is developing. Teachers are managing complexity and ambiguity as they try to implement a new system while they are still developing it. This is supported by students’ comments centered on the following: the variability in implementation across content areas and classrooms, a lack of
clarity in standards which hampers their understanding of what it is they should truly know and be able to do and the existence of a wide middle level range that lacks specificity on student progress.

Four students shared that SBG is better suited for certain content areas rather than others. A student claimed, “SBG for sure makes sense in humanities classes, because standard-based grading allows for that gray area. In math, science or STEM you're either right or you're wrong”. Another student’s perspective was, “I think it's (SBG) been immensely helpful for my English and Spanish classes, but for my math classes, I really don't think it is”. Moreover, a student disclosed that “SBG works best with classes that have a bunch of different learning opportunities” and he provides a counter-example, “I took AP government and my teacher had three grades for one of the standards for the whole semester”.

56% of the interviewed students specifically talked about incongruence in execution of the system at the classroom level. Some felt that the effectiveness of standards-based grading was dependent upon a teacher’s individual implementation. One student suggested that his AP Statistics teacher’s strategy resembled more of a traditional grading approach when he disclosed, “In my AP Statistics class there are two categories, free response questions (FRQs) and multiple choice. They are weighted half and half. It feels more like traditional grading”. Another student made known that teacher support and availability are paramount to the success of SBG when he remarked, “I think teachers need to make sure that they are open for kids. I've had teachers say they are open for remediation and they weren’t. It only works when teachers are willing to put in the effort and help us”.

Another student indicated that she was empathetic to her teachers and shared an uneasiness during the transition to SBG. She voiced feeling uncomfortable and nervous,
“especially when it came to something as important as a grade” and recognized that “teachers weren’t used to it”. Two other students also shared concern with teacher implementation from a perspective of bias and subjectivity. A female student discussed how the grade is dependent on how the teacher interprets your performance and she disclosed, “It's not that straightforward sometimes. I'm sure it's not always the case, but sometimes it feels personal”. A male student summarized his dislike of the subjectivity of standards-based grading by explaining, “I have often felt as if too much power is given to the teacher to determine who is making progress along what lines and according to whose standards. It results in what I would say highly, highly subjective grades; it lacks clarity”.

Two students shared that they felt like they did not completely understand the standard and the success criteria for the standard. A student’s perspective was “They (teachers) don’t really do a good job explaining what each target is and how it affects us”. Another student echoed this sentiment by sharing, “I really don't know what any of the standards mean because I don't really know what they’re saying”.

**Understanding the standards-based continuum of learning.** Standards-based grading systems use descriptors to indicate a student’s proficiency on a learning continuum in lieu of numerical percentages. In some classrooms, words such as exceeding, meeting, approaching and beginning are implemented. In others, numbers such as 1,2,3,4 serve as indicators of progress on a continuum of learning. 56% of students shared that the middle of the learning continuum was vague and too broad to really provide students feedback on how they were progressing. A student suggests, “If the categories were more specific, if there were more of them or more descriptiveness, it would be a lot more beneficial. You can learn more about where you need to progress and where you are relative to mastery”. Furthermore,
some students felt that the highest level on the learning continuum (exceeding) was unattainable in some classes. Table 9 captures students’ thoughts on these perspectives.

Table 9

Students’ Perspectives on the Learning Continuum and the Elusiveness of Exceeding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Paraphrased Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It doesn't make sense to me as to why a two is 20%, but then you've got a top 5%, which is the three and the four”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I find issue with the way that twos are such a wide range and how fours, especially in STEM classes are hardly given out”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“My biggest thing with SBG is just the vastness of how a two is versus a four. It's really frustrating, especially in classes where you struggle”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“It’s unclear, some teachers will give a two plus and that doesn't exist in the grade book, it's a two. It’s frustrating because I want to know what could I have done to get over that hump and get to a three”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“A two has a really wide range and so does a three. I can't really tell exactly where I am with terms of mastery, because it’s not as descriptive as traditional grading”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“I think it's extremely difficult to get a four. I think I've only gotten a four in Spanish class. Even if you get everything, right? Some teachers don't give you a four, if you get one part of the standard wrong. That doesn't feel right. In traditional, if I get one little thing wrong, I can still get an A. With SBG, it doesn't feel like you can get an A, there's no in between”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>“I think it's too vague because it could range from a C to a D plus, and you don't really know how well you're doing. You can miss one or two questions and drop down to approaching, but you could also miss five and still be at approaching. It's hard to tell where you're at, when you're approaching or even developing”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation of Findings

As the instructional leader of Finlay Middle School, I continually ask myself, “Are the students reaping the benefits of standards-based grading?” I often wondered if our work was so far outside the cultural norms around grading that the context and culture of our learning community is hampering its effectiveness. In addition, development of learner attributes can be difficult to measure and although we report on each student’s level of proficiency in these areas,
it is descriptive in nature and not quantitatively measured. This makes it very difficult to quantitatively describe the success of the program and to really know how students are affected by its implementation. According to Patton (2008), program evaluation involves more than examining goal attainment or outcomes measurement, evaluations can focus on unanticipated consequences and long-term impacts. I think the latter has surfaced from the student interviews and the research provides a qualitative understanding of the effectiveness of standards-based grading on overall student learning and development of 21st century skills.

When interpreting the students’ responses, it is important to mention that the participants ranged in age, learning pathway and years of experience with standards-based grading. A correlation emerged that should be considered when reviewing student responses and would be an area of further study. Students with less experience with standards-based grading were more likely to have difficulty with explaining the system, while more experienced students easily described it. Two participants had IEPs and three others were enrolled in an accelerated pathway dominated by Advanced Placement courses. Students who had disabilities that impacted their learning valued the fact that standards-based grading allowed for multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning and allowed them the same access to achievement of the standard when compared to students who may learn at a different rate.

Conversely, students in accelerated pathways felt differently about standards-based grading. Although they were astute enough to see its intended value, they did not think it impacted them as learners. The students felt that they were already self-directed learners and the system in which they were learning didn’t matter; they were simply going to do well regardless. Moreover, high achieving students shared a concern with the translation of standards-based grading and reporting to post-secondary institutions. One student affirmed this when he stated,
“If there were a way to transform how colleges and universities measure success for first year students coming from high school, who’ve had an SBG experience. If they could consider a more wholesale representation of the student, that would make more sense. I think it would be a pretty good way to ensure that SBG is working the way it's supposed to and it would be more accepted”.

When considering programming that develops the learner attributes of students, standards-based grading can provide the space for 21st century skills to develop. John Hattie (2009) shares that learning is a very personal journey for the teacher and the student. “It requires much skill for teachers to demonstrate to all their students that they can see the students’ perspective and communicate it back to them so that they have valuable feedback to self-assess, feel safe and learn to understand others and the content” (Hattie, 2009, p. 23). When implemented with fidelity, standards-based grading can provide the caveat through which 21st century learner skills can be intertwined with the curriculum content.

“When students have an elevated role in the cumulative demonstration of learning, they work in conjunction with teachers to socially construct areas of improvement to further develop in the next unit or topic” (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017, p. 25). Furthermore, attending to a student’s readiness for learning allows for academic growth. “Because readiness for learning will inevitably vary for all students, teachers must make appropriate adjustments to enable learning for each student” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 19). A standards-based grading system allows for these practices to develop and can elevate the learning of all students.

However, as standards-based grading begins to take hold in secondary institutions, one must be aware that it is not the norm in grading practices and external pressures surface from the broader community due to the lack of understanding. In order for SBG reform to be successful,
stakeholders need to understand the \textit{why} behind the change and educational leaders should be sensitive to the loss of security, the anxiety and the discomfort that accompany established grading traditions (Guskey, 2020). The following sentiment shared by a student validates this perspective, “I like the idea of being able to focus a student's efforts on learning as it is, as opposed to just receiving a letter grade. I like the idea that it seeks in principle. I'm not really sure that the world is really ready for it or can adapt well to it”.

\textbf{Judgements}

The attitudes and experiences of students regarding standards-based grading were as varied as their experiences. However, even if students preferred traditional grading, they were still able to find value in the system and articulate its strengths. The robustness of the data is anchored in the fact that students were asked to simply discuss their perceptions of and experiences with strengths of standards-based grading. The following themes prevailed even though the interview questions did not focus on these areas.

- In a standards-based grading system, the whole student is considered and each can learn at their own pace.
- In a standards-based grading system, students can engage in content in ways that deepen learning.
- Standards based grading is not just about achievement, but about growth as a learner.
- Standards based grading supports the emotional development of students as learners.
- Feedback on learning is enhanced through teacher and student collaboration in a standards-based grading system.
Although the positive impacts of the system are aligned to best practices, there is still more work to do to refine the process and improve its effectiveness. Competencies that still need to be developed include parental understanding, teacher execution and continued student experience. A student summarized this when he shared, “The first couple of years we all had to get used to it and it felt like grade chasing. As we mature and everyone is adjusting, it is more about self-monitoring and knowing what you need to work on”. All students provided valuable insights on how the practices can be improved and this will be further discussed in recommendations.

_The Leader’s Guide to 21st Century Education_ states that 21st century learners are active collaborators in the teaching and learning process (Kay & Greenhill, 2013). The interview data overwhelmingly supports the fact that standards-based grading systems can provide the architecture around which 21st Century learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-teaching can develop. “Teaching students how to assess themselves, rather than just do it for them, provides them with an opportunity to self-reflect and take ownership over their learning” (Couros, 2015, p. 114).

Leading districts are creating innovative practices every year and they are breaking new ground in embedding 21st century education into curriculum and assessments. “The hard work of reshaping curriculum and assessment is an important part of the 21st century journey” (Kay & Greenhill, 2013, preface). The data suggests that implementation of a standards-based grading program can serve as the cornerstone for reshaping educational practices in a way that promotes the development of 21st century learner attributes in secondary students.
Recommendations

Ambiguity around the learning expectations and appropriate evidence of learning is the epicenter of overall improvement of an SBG system. Teachers should work to articulate learning standards in student friendly language that includes clear success criteria. Additionally, the success criteria should be scaffolded in a way that moves students along the continuum of learning and clearly communicates where students are in their learning. Providing students with clarity around expectations and growth will not only reduce students’ anxiety but also improve parental understanding.

Consideration should be given to enhancing the effectiveness of rubric language by reducing the broadness of performance categories and using language that provides specific and actionable feedback to students. Additionally, general implementation inconsistency across classrooms can be mitigated by oversight, support and professional development centered on effective implementation of a standards-based grading philosophy and system.

As George Couros (2015) suggests, “One of the best ways for leaders to take notice of, and even discover, new and better opportunities is to experience life from the end user’s viewpoint” (Couros, 2015, p. 82). Therefore, it is suggested that teachers and instructional leaders continue to ask and listen to students’ perspectives. As the end users of the system, their continued insight can help leaders adjust and improve the system to maximize its benefits on achievement, growth and the development of 21st century learner attributes.
Chapter Five

To-Be Framework

Introduction

When considering a utilization focused approach to my research, I am reminded that conceptual use occurs when an evaluation influences how key people think about a program or policy (Patton, 2008). Patton further suggests that “findings can provide important conceptual insights for future planning but are not necessarily directed at a particular decision for a specific program” (Patton, 2008, p. 103). With this in mind, I attempted to detail the actions, mindsets, and supports that need to be implemented to enhance the benefits of a standards-based grading system to create a “To-Be” vision. The following is a careful consideration of the Wagner et al.’s (2006) 4Cs—context, culture, conditions, and competencies—and provides the structure around which the vision is developed. All four of these dimensions should be engaged in order to promote student learning and growth.

Envisioning the Success of Standards Based Grading

As discussed in chapter one, the impetus behind the transition to SBG was soundly based in educational research. John Hattie (2009), indicates that “high quality formative assessment (informal assessment that occurs in the classroom to inform the teacher as to where students are in the learning cycle) and feedback that is directly related to specific standards for learning have a powerful impact on student learning, showing an effect size on standardized tests that exceeds the impact of most known educational interventions” (Hattie, 2009, p. 53). Furthermore, grading and reporting aligned to specific standards, accompanied with ongoing assessment and feedback to students, has been shown to significantly boost both motivation and achievement for
students. This research guides the development of an ideal systemic context that provides the platform for directing future conditions, competencies and cultures.

**Transforming the Context of the System**

Transforming the context of the system will be a difficult challenge as it requires a great deal of unlearning. Keeping things the way they have always been is certainly the path of least resistance. Adults (educators, parents and community members) are comfortable when the education of today’s students looks most like the education they received, as shared by Lubelfeld and Polyak (2017) in *The Unlearning Leader*. “Stakeholders consider themselves experts on education as a result of having been educated themselves” (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017, p.36). In order to transform the context, the community will need to unlearn what they know about grading and understand that grading is truly about communication of learning and growth; it is not intended to sort and rank students.

Additionally, the high competition between learners and within the entire learning community to establish a position in the perceived order of schooling must be rethought. Competition should be manifested in ways outside of marks and final proficiency designations. Ideally, administrators and teachers should help parents and students find ways to celebrate and acknowledge learning and growth in lieu of a final grade point average.

A larger national and global context also needs to be considered and presents an even greater challenge for change. This is due to the fact that learner mobility is high across nations and into selective schools supporting the calculation of traditional grades and GPAs. Traditional grading information is more easily transferable to other educational contexts. A To-Be situation would include the championing of standards-based grading practices in a way that helps other
Parents and students should understand that true rigor is not about simply achieving a grade; a grading and reporting system is not the conduit to rigor. Rigor is developed through the learning experiences we provide for students that help them understand complex knowledge and ideas. Additionally, these experiences help students acquire skills that can be applied in a variety of educational and career contexts throughout their lives. Rigor is not a finite number or percentage; it is about development of learner attributes. Parents, students, administrators and teachers should embrace and champion this mindset.

Developing a New Culture of Learning

In order to develop a new culture of learning, a to-be scenario would include an alignment of all stakeholders to a growth mindset. All constituents will continue to value high achievement in academic content but also equally value the development of learner behaviors such as collaboration, resiliency and development of a growth mindset. As Carol Dweck suggests in her book *Mindset, The New Psychology of Success* (2006), every word and every action send a message. “It can be a fixed-mindset message that says: You have permanent traits and I’m judging them. Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says: You are a developing person and I am interested in your development” (Dweck, 2006, p. 173).

Moreover, parents and students should learn the “language” of standards-based grading and understand the fundamentals of the system. Application of this new knowledge will help debunk the allegiance to traditional systems and foster a deeper connection to standards-based systems. A school’s culture should capitalize on the strengths of standards-based grading systems that surfaced in this study. Teachers should continue to apply standards-based grading
processes in ways that individualize the pace of learning for students and provides, both teachers and students, with a broader understanding of what it is students know and are able to do.

**Creating Conditions for Change**

The following conditions are crucial to the development of an idealistic To-Be implementation of standards-based grading.

- Educating parents and students on how the learner attributes that are fostered in a standards-based grading system will directly impact their success in post-secondary options.

- Enhancing communication between parents, students and teachers with improved reporting practices. Providing a platform that promotes an understanding of learning and growth as opposed to being discrete moments in time that are averaged into a student’s final proficiency designation.

- Creating purposeful communication to parents and students on how they can support their child in learning. Helping parents center at-home rhetoric with their children on the mastery of the identified skills within the standards, not simply on the attainment of a proficiency level or garnering of points.

- Capitalizing on a highly educated learning community and involving them as partners in the learning process.

- Providing professional development and instructional leadership for teachers on the use of a backwards design process to align resources, activities and assessments to standards in a way that provides useful evidences towards student learning.
Developing Competencies

Just as standards-based grading clearly articulates what students should know and be able to do, identified competencies should do the same for all members of the learning community.

To obtain the To-Be vision, the following competencies should be developed:

• Students understand and align to the philosophy of SBG and can communicate it to other stakeholders.
• Teachers are skilled and comfortable with standards based grading practices, championing the usefulness to both parents and students.
• Students understand how SBG provides specific feedback on skills that they can apply to their learning.
• Students are clear on how to use standards-based feedback to guide their growth either with remediation or enrichment.
• Students philosophically understand that activities, practice and assessments all serve as evidences towards learning (wellness checks) and are not intended to be post-mortem reports.
• Students exhibit a growth mindset that focuses on learning as a journey.
• Teachers reduce ambiguity by having clearly articulated success criteria.
• Teachers understand the continuum of growth and can communicate whether or not students are growing at an expected rate.
• Eliminate “exceeding” from rubrics and report cards or create very clear criteria on how students can obtain an exceeding mark.

Understanding and respecting research is essential, but converting that knowledge to effect change in human conduct within an organization requires political, managerial,
psychological and leadership skills (Fullan, 2006). Although the benefits of standards-based grading are deeply grounded in research, focusing on research alone will not affect overall change. Change requires a willingness to think about the system as a whole and address the underpinnings of the frustrations and mis-understandings. Plus, change in public educational systems is not rationale; understanding the irrationality of the stakeholders is an important lens through which actions and decisions should be made (Arierly, 2008). When considering changes in grading, it is not just addressing the irrationality of the change, but understanding the cultural, contextual and competencies that are deeply rooted in the cultural paradigm of grading.
CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions

Introduction

Grading and reporting are integral parts of the instructional process and when done well, they can provide vital information to students, teachers and parents. “Grading and reporting can certify the attainment of learning goals, identify where additional work is needed and provide the basis for improvement efforts” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p.2). However, few topics in education generate more controversy, and change in this area is not easy. In fact, “issues related to grading and reporting are well documented in more than 4,000 books, articles, essays and research studies” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p.24).

The purpose of this study was to understand whether or not students are truly reaping the theoretical benefits of standards-based grading and if their experiences with SBG help to develop 21st century learner attributes. The goal of this chapter is to provide strategies and actions for successful implementation and continued reform of SBG practices. The proposed framework, is grounded in the information gathered from the students in this study. Additionally, it considers the entire learning community and includes continued areas of development for teachers, parents and administrators. The strategies and actions provide the bridge from the “As-Is” state of grading and reporting in Finlay Middle School and Lincoln School District to what is “To-Be” and they are grounded in the context, culture, conditions and competencies of the teachers, students, parents and administration.
Strategies

**Strategy one, educate parents and enhance communication.** The current culture and context of the learning community is characterized by parents who perceive the purpose of grading is to establish a rank and order amongst students. The first strategy to achieve the “To-Be” culture is to educate parents on the philosophical purpose of grading, how standards-based grading can enhance learning and how it can develop learner attributes that students will use in post-secondary options and future careers. The challenge for leaders is to attend to the practices of adaptive leadership while implementing a plan of action.

Adaptive challenges are difficult because their solutions require people to think differently. These types of challenges are grounded in the complexity of human nature. “Adaptive leadership begins with the diagnostic work of separating a problem’s technical elements from its adaptive elements” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 70). Therefore, the task for district leaders is to appreciate, value and take in what the experts in education are saying and go beyond the technical thinking (the research) to take into account the human implications (parents, students and teachers). It is not unusual for parents to have unique perspectives on grading and reporting; although few parents like the new forms of reporting, most favor change in current practices. Simultaneously, “parents’ ideas about grading and reporting tend to be limited by the array of practices they experienced as students” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 20). For these reasons, parents should not only be involved in grading reform planning but also be provided with well-designed parent education programs. These programs should help parents understand the rationale behind grading, the advantages of a standards-based system and how they can use the information to support their child’s learning and growth.
“Effective grading and reporting are more of a challenge in effective communication than simply a process of documenting student achievement” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 192). Administrators and teachers should focus on simplifying and clarifying communication to both students and parents. This can be done by developing grade reporting language that is free of educational jargon and complex language and is coupled with a system for two-way communication. These actions will not only promote understanding but also provide an avenue through which parents and students can ask questions and seek clarification.

**Strategy two, facilitate interpretation of grade reports for students and parents.**

When grading and reporting relates to specific learning criteria, both students and teachers can develop a clear picture on what students know and are able to do. Although the current As-Is status of standards-based grading in Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School provides students with learning expectations on articulated standards, the students in this study expressed frustration over the ambiguity of the learning expectations. Additionally, students shared that the middle mark for proficiency was too broad and did not provide them with information specific enough to know how they were progressing in their learning or if they were progressing at the expected rate.

“If learning is assessed using a well-defined set of credible learning standards that include graduated levels of performance, then progress and growth can more accurately be determined” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 41). For these reasons a course of action would include, professional development on implementation of a backwards design process when creating assessments, instruction and rubrics. John Hattie defines backwards design as “moving from the learning intentions to the success criteria and then to the resources and activities needed
to attain the success criteria” (Hattie, 2012, p. 119). Therefore, teacher collaboration should center on creation of success criteria that is clear and written in student friendly language.

When clarity in learning expectations is included within the context of standards-based grading and reporting, the power of feedback can be leveraged by students to improve achievement and growth. This is validated by John Hattie when he states:

For feedback to be received and have a positive effect, we need transparent and challenging goals (learning intentions), an understanding of current status relative to these goals (knowledge of prior achievement), transparent and understood criteria for success, and commitment and skills by both teachers and students in investing and implementing strategies and understanding relative to these goals and success criteria.

(Hattie, 2009, p. 151)

To further enhance feedback on student progress, success criteria should be scaffolded in a way that provides a continuum of learning that moves students towards the larger expectations of the learning standard. Although this will aide in providing stakeholders with information regarding a student’s proficiency relative to a standard, teachers should implement a communication system that indicates the adequacy of the level of achievement relative to the expectations for the particular grade level. Furthermore, the success criteria that will be used to evaluate student’s achievement, and the continuum detailing the progression of student growth, should be clearly communicated to students and parents.

**Strategy three, calibrate practice by developing teacher competency and consistency across classrooms.** Grading is a subjective process. It involves one set of human beings (teachers) making judgements about another group of human beings (students). “Being
subjective does not mean that grades lack credibility or are indefensible; it simply implies that grading is and will always be an exercise in professional judgement” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 194). In order to create a “To-Be” state of consistency across grade levels and subject areas, it is recommended that teachers are continually grounded in the philosophical basis of “why” we grade, what information we want to communicate and what result we hope to achieve with the communication.

Not only should building leaders provide time for staff to collaborate vertically and horizontally to calibrate grading practices but administration should purposefully embed time into professional development for continued review of practices. Additionally, school improvement planning should include goals centered on the development of teacher capacities with standards-based grading with a direct alignment to the district’s mission of developing 21st century learner attributes in students.

**Strategy four, development of a growth mindset.** In order to create a “To-Be” culture of learning, a purposeful focus on development of a growth mindset is suggested. Carol Dweck (2008) coined the term *growth mindset*, defining it as a person’s belief in their ability to grow, learn, and change. A growth mindset is manifested through actions and words and impacts how both students and adults view learning. Creating a culture firmly grounded in a growth mindset would create an environment that promotes confidence with risk taking that is grounded in a belief that hard work and perseverance are the avenues to ultimate learning and growth.

“Great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning” (Dweck, 2006, p. 194). District and building leaders should implement opportunities for teachers and parents to be educated on the philosophical underpinnings of a growth mindset. A specific focus would include developing the abilities of
teachers and parents to use language and actions that support both process and growth in learning. Actions would include parent education nights, coffee chats, book studies and principal meetings. To capitalize on the strengths of the students’ voices, it is also suggested that students’ perspectives on how SBG promotes individualized learning and supports the “whole student” are shared through videos or informational student panels.

**Strategy five, maintain a focus on development 21st century learner attributes.** In *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning with Habits of Mind* (2017), the authors share that schools should personalize learning to empower students to find their own way through an increasingly challenging, complex and uncertain global context (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). From this study, students have shared that a standards-based grading system can provide the platform from which 21st century learner attributes can develop. Within the context of SBG practices, students are informed participants in their learning. They monitor, adjust and refine their work as needed. It is suggested that district leaders recognize that standards-based grading promotes the skills of self-reflection, self-assessment and self-directed learning and work to purposefully connect instructional, financial and physical resources to the continued implementation of the system.

**Leadership Lessons**

For the past five years, understanding and implementing the philosophies of standards-based grading has almost been the sole focus of Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School. Despite the hurdles, the frustrations and the pandemic, we haven’t lost sight of the potential that standards-based grading can provide for our students. We continue to reflect, edit and persevere hoping students are truly benefiting from our actions.
As an instructional leader, one of the lessons I have learned is to empathize with the difficulties of transforming grading practices and work to serve the learning community by deeply understanding the challenges and supporting stakeholders so they can experience success. This is summarized by the following:

It is easy to get caught up in the precision of the transformation. Spending time on targets and scales, assessments and reporting; we dive into the measuring, the calibrating and the tracking so that we can more accurately communicate about learning. This is all vital. But if we don’t balance the precision with the romance of the experience and possibility, we risk getting lost in the details. Romance comes from experiencing success. Teachers need to feel what it’s like when it’s working in order to keep trying and tweaking and struggling when it’s not. (Rinkema & Williams, 2019, p. 138)

In order to keep the “romance” of experiencing success alive, it is important as a leader to be well educated in the practices and philosophies of SBG. However, leaders should “lead from behind by being invested in helping teachers create the shared knowledge necessary for sustained improvement and relinquishing the role of an expert who has all the answers and become a collaborative public learner” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 208). Leaders should feel comfortable about engaging directly in discussions about assessment and grading and collaboratively shoulder the burden of difficult conversations with parents about grading. They should promote a culture of continual reflection, rethinking and revising by not only providing resources for training and time for collaboration, but also by being an active participant in the work.

As staff are hired to replace retirees and accommodate growing enrollment numbers, the diversity of teacher experiences with standards-based grading has increased. Furthermore, changing curricular requirements and the addition of new learning standards has resulted
in variability in comfortability and competency with SBG. In Michael Fullan’s, *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008), he shares six strategies that practically guide the complexities of change while balancing the consistency-innovation scenario. Secret four, *Learning is the Work*, focuses on how organizations “address their core goals and tasks with relentless consistency, while at the same time learning continuously how to get better and better at what they are doing” (Fullan, 2008, p. 76).

As a leader, I learned to balance the integration of the “precision needed for consistent performance (using what we already know) with the new learning required for continuous improvement” (Fullan, 2008, p. 76). Professional development and support that balances the consistency-innovation conundrum needs to be grounded in the context of understanding adult ways of knowing as Drago-Severson (2013) describes in *Learning for Leadership*. A differentiated professional learning plan would enhance meaning and promote engagement for all experience levels of staff.

Leaders should consider how educators with different developmental orientations conceptualize information and make sense of what constitutes a good leader. Attending to adult’s expectations would include professional development that does the following, (a) gives instrumental knowers clear knowledge and learning expectations so they understand how to do the work the right, (b) demonstrate care, support and patience for socializing knowers by providing judgement-free opportunities for staff to openly share concerns, ask questions and understand various perspectives, and (c) providing opportunities for self-authoring knowers who have mastered SBG practices to facilitate the work of smaller teams and share what they know and understand to support others (Drago-Severson, et.al., 2013).
Finally, one of the most powerful leadership lessons learned is the involvement of the students in the decision-making process and strategic work of the change. Students are not just merely the recipients of SBG, they are the vital end users that can offer perspectives that cannot be captured by teachers, parents or administrators. In the Leader’s Guide to 21st Century Education (2013), the authors share that “when students are involved in authentic ways, they can be some of the most powerful implementation partners” (Kay & Greenhill, 2013, pg. 36). By understanding their attitudes, their expectations and their perceptions about what they need, teachers and administrators can create conditions that capitalize on the benefits of standards-based grading.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of these strategies, actions and leadership lessons are not only to develop the context, conditions, competencies and culture of all stakeholders but also to ensure that grading and assessment function as the conduit towards learning and growth. Standards-based grading has the potential to positively impact the development of 21st century learner attributes, promote deeper levels of learning and enhance achievement for all learners. Without a continued commitment to change and achieving a “To-Be” scenario, the benefits of SBG may go unrealized. When leaders build the individual and collective capacity of stakeholders and teachers learn every day through experience and transparency of practice the net effect is a critical mass of organizational stakeholders that are indeed learners (Fullan, 2018).
CHAPTER SEVEN

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Introduction

In Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School, the entire learning community values rigorous learning opportunities and high achievement for all students. Additionally, the district’s focus on the development of learner attributes is articulated in the district’s Vision 2025 core set of competencies identified as the Portrait of a Graduate in Figure 1. The competencies do not center on academic achievement, rather they center on learner behaviors that align to the 21st century attributes we hope to develop in students.

From the research completed in this study, it is clear that a standards-based grading and reporting system has the potential to be a platform for the development of learner competencies such as adaptability, perseverance and critical thinking. However, it’s value in the development of these attributes and its impact on overall student learning is not readily recognized by teachers, parents and board members. Even though grading and reporting tasks have always been an integral part of education, grading and reporting has primarily remained the same while the landscape of educational best practice continues to evolve.

In Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning (2001), Guskey and Bailey highlight the growing impetus for changes in grading and reporting systems. They identify five developments that support the imperative for change in these systems: “growing emphasis on standards and performance assessments, increased demands from the learning community for more and better information on student progress in learning, advances in grade reporting technology, grading is one of an educator’s most important professional responsibilities, and the existence of research that highlights the gap between our knowledge
base of best practice and common grading and reporting practices” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p.11).

Although Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School have made the change in their grading and reporting systems to implement a full standards-based approach, board policies do not directly reflect this commitment. Policy language does not align to the philosophical basis of standards-based grading. Current board policy on grading is minimal, generally written and aligned to traditional grading systems.

Policy 6:280 Grading and Promotion. The administration and professional staff shall establish a system of grading and reporting academic achievement to students and their parents and guardians. The system shall also determine when promotion requirements are met. Every teacher shall maintain an evaluation record for each student in the teacher's classroom. The final grade assigned by the teacher cannot be changed by a District administrator without notifying the teacher. Reasons for changing a student's final grade may include: A miscalculation of test scores; A technical error in assigning a particular grade or score; The teacher agrees to allow the student to do extra work that may impact the grade; An inappropriate grading system used to determine the grade; or an inappropriate grade based on an appropriate grading system. Should a grade change be made, the administrator making the change must sign the changed record.

Additionally, board policy, 6:10 Educational Philosophy and Objectives, includes the following:

The district’s educational program will seek to provide an opportunity for each child to develop to his or her maximum potential. The objectives for the educational program are: To foster self-discovery, self-awareness, and self-discipline. To stimulate
intellectual curiosity and growth. To provide fundamental career concepts and skills. To help each student strive for excellence and instill a desire to reach the limit of his or her potential. To develop the fundamental skills which will provide a basis for lifelong learning.

Although the district’s articulated educational philosophy recommends that the educational program should promote and develop skills in students to be life-long learners, the foundational lens of the policy is curricular and programmatic in focus and does not include how a grading and reporting system can provide the avenue through which these skills can be fostered.

District Policy 6:65: Student Social and Emotional Development, describes the expectations for SEL development by indicating that the superintendent shall incorporate Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into the district’s curriculum and other educational programs consistent with the district’s mission and the goals and benchmarks of the Illinois Learning Standards. The Illinois Learning Standards include three goals for students, one of which is directly linked to skills students can acquire and develop from a standards-based grading and reporting system: develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

The district’s policy further delineates seven ways to incorporate SEL objectives into the district’s curriculum and other educational programming, one of which is assessment and accountability for teaching SEL skills to students. The policy includes suggestions for how this may be accomplished with the following statement: this may include implementation of a process to assess and report baseline information and ongoing progress about school climate, students' social and emotional development, and academic performance. Although standards-
based grading practices require teachers to report on skills such as preparation, preparedness and collaboration, this is not clearly included in the district’s policy.

According to Guskey and Bailey, “grading and reporting policies and practices tend to be fragmented, ambiguous and confusing to parents, students and some teachers” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 190). This ambiguity is not only found amongst classrooms in a school building but across districts, states and countries. When policies lack appropriate detail regarding grading and reporting expectations, it further exasperates the ambiguity and confusion for students and parents. Furthermore, the lack of clarity in demonstrating the link between grading, instruction and learning can be misleading and detrimental to the achievement for all students.

Policy Statement

I propose that grading and reporting be recognized as integral parts of teaching and learning and suggest that policy makers develop standards of practice that align to the philosophical underpinnings of standards-based grading. Locally, school boards should consider including language in policy not just centered on promotional guidance or modification of grade reports, but to also include the philosophical impetus for grading and how it is an integral part of the educational philosophy and strategic plan.

A clearly articulated district philosophy on the purpose of grading and guidelines for grade reporting would provide direction for administrators and teachers to implement more accurate and consistent reports on student achievement relative to state and local learning standards. This consistent reporting can better inform instructional strategies needed for intervention or enrichment. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), support this sentiment by stating, “A grade should give as clear a measure as possible of the best a student can do. Too often, grades reflect an unknown mixture of multiple factors. Unless teachers throughout a school or
district completely agree on the elements and factor them into their grading in consistent ways, the meaning of a grade will vary from classroom to classroom” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 133). Moreover, articulating an agreed upon purpose and process for grading would have an overarching effect on multiple teaching and learning goals. For example, implementation of a standards-based grading system directly aligns to the vision of the district and can be incorporated as an actionable goal for multiple objectives; it can serve as the cornerstone for professional development, teacher training and collaboration.

Not only can SBG help develop 21st century learner attributes in students, but also when grading and reporting is aligned to specific standards, accompanied with ongoing assessment and feedback to students, it is shown to significantly boost both motivation and achievement for students. Research by Black and Wiliam (1998) and Hattie (2009) indicates that high quality formative assessment (informal assessment that occurs in the classroom to inform the teacher as to where students are in the learning cycle) and feedback that is directly related to specific standards for learning have a powerful impact on student learning, showing an effect size on standardized tests that exceeds the impact of most known educational interventions.

Analysis of Needs

It is critical to consider the implementation of new policy from the varied perspectives of the stakeholders that comprise, and influence, the learning community. The following section outlines and analyzes the perceptions and implications of the proposed policy from six different perspectives: educational, economic, social, political, legal and moral.

Educational analysis. From an educational lens, the implementation of a standards-based grading approach has many advantages over a traditional grading system. The work of
educators to identify critical learning criteria from state standards develops an intimate and in-depth understanding of the content. Standards-based grading also helps to improve reporting validity, reliability, fairness and usefulness. It can serve as a road map for students and teachers relative to clearly articulated learning goals. This detail in student progress can inform student remediation and enrichment ultimately targeting work on closing achievement gaps. “Standards-based grading becomes a direct link to enhancing student learning for all students” (Munoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 65).

Since the publication of John Hattie’s, Visible Learning, educators continually are searching for ways to take advantage of its transformative potential. In Hattie’s meta-analysis of over 800 studies that included over 70,000 participants, he provides a common expression for the magnitude of the impact specific practices have on student learning. He calls this the “effect size” (d) and when d=1.0 it indicates an increase of one standard deviation on the outcome of increasing student achievement. A 1.0 standard deviation is typically associated with advancing a student’s achievement by two to three years. Therefore, educational practices that have an effect size greater than zero indicate that they would be significant practices in enhancing achievement. The closer the effect size is to 1.0, the greater its positive influence on achievement.

The results reported by Hattie make it clear that when students know how to learn, they become their own teachers. Hattie describes this practice as visible learning and insists that it is driven by visible teaching. In a recent publication, Developing Assessment-Capable Visible Learners, the authors further support this claim by stating, “Students who become visible learners use feedback to develop learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment and self-teaching” (Frey, et al., 2018, p. 53).
Teaching strategies which align to the core philosophical building blocks of standards-based grading have remarkably high effect sizes. For example, strategies that emphasize learning intentions (goals) have an effect size of .56, strategies that emphasize success criteria (mastery learning) have an effect size of .58, strategies that emphasize feedback have an effect size of .73 and strategies that emphasize student meta-cognitive/self-regulated learning, have an effect size of .69. Implementation of a standards-based grading and reporting system can provide the conduit through which these strategies can be implemented; a true integration of grading and grading policy into teaching and learning.

**Economic analysis.** According to Odden, a strategic approach to using the educational dollar means “aligning the use of resources to a solid, powerful and comprehensive education-improvement strategy” (Odden, 2012, p.9). Adopting new language in school policy will provide an explicit vision for grading that integrates teaching, learning and assessment. Additionally, the strategies will provide a cost-effective conduit to the achievement of many goals articulated in the district vision.

This approach is further supported by Odden when he explains that “a cost-effective method with large positive impacts on student learning is the use of short cycle assessments, common assessments and benchmark assessments that inform instruction” (Odden, 2012, p.18). Implementation of a standards-based reporting and grading system makes specific learning expectations and evidences of learning visible to students. When learning evidence is gathered from short cycle and benchmark assessments, students and teachers know specifically when, and how, to intervene in a very cost-effective way that will ultimately impact achievement.
Finally, because implementation of standards-based grading is grounded in a philosophical mind set and does not require additional technology, teaching materials or human resources, very little financial resources are required for its enactment. For example, funds for professional development already exist in schools and districts, reallocation of these funds to teacher training on SBG could easily be done. A potential cost could come from the need to adapt technology that aligns to standards-based reporting. However, a student information system is already in effect in the district and budgeted. A nominal cost may come from switching platforms or purchasing an add-on to a current system that provides the grade reporting feature.

**Social analysis.** Updating policy to include specificity around grading, will be a paradigm shift for boards, administrators, teachers and parents. In the past, generalized district policies on grading have made sense in schools as boards focus on the *what* of school improvement and not the *how*. In *Beyond Theory and Degrees*, Fitzpatrick shares that this “delineation of roles makes sense so that boards do not meddle in operational tasks (the how) that might derail the organizations focus on teaching, learning and student achievement” (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 89).

However, it is important to note that “schools that improve student achievement and reduce achievement gaps have a professional school culture” (Odden, 2012, p. 24). According to Odden, professional school cultures are characterized by common understandings of effective instruction and a systemic approach to deploying these instructional practices; a de-privatization of instructional practice. In the past, teachers formulated their own grading practices within the generalities of the policy and much privatization of this practice continues to exist. Because of SBG’s comprehensive ability to advance the goals of the district vision, a common understanding of effective grading and a systematic approach would help calibrate the
experience for all students in the district thus justifying de-privatization and the involvement of the board in the *how*.

It is also important to note that the landscape for school district governance and educational leadership is shifting and ideal regimes of governance serve as platforms for framing educational reform in districts. One such regime is the professional regime that relies on classroom educators whose expertise in teaching and learning is at the center of decision-making and governance. “Its form of accountability relies primarily on professional discretion, and is constrained by norms of professional practice” (Horsford, Scott, & Anderson, 2019, p. 94). Would implementation of specific policy on grading cause teachers to feel as though their professional discretion is not valued? Or can we change the narrative to focus on the professional discretion that teachers will gain in determining what are enduring understandings of their content area and what are the best evidences they can collect?

Additionally, teachers, counselors and leaders inhabit workplaces that are being rapidly restructured around them by policy. “Theories and frameworks are integrated into the practice of the people who are applying the ideas in real time” (Horsford et al., 2019, p.193) For these reasons, teachers should be included in the development of new policy language to acknowledge their expertise and provide them with a central role in district decision making.

**Political analysis.** Transforming the context of the system will be a difficult challenge as it requires a great deal of unlearning. Keeping things, the way they have always been is certainly the path of least resistance. Adults (educators, parents and community members) are comfortable when the education of today’s students looks mostly like the education they received as shared by Lubelfeld and Polyak in *The Unlearning Leader* (2017). “Stakeholders consider themselves experts on education as a result of having been educated themselves”
In order to transform the context, the community will need to unlearn what they know about grading and understand that grading is truly about communication of learning and growth and is not intended to sort and rank students.

Additionally, the high competition between learners and within the entire learning community to establish a position in the perceived order of schooling must be rethought. Competition should be manifested in ways outside of marks and final proficiency designations. Ideally, administrators and teachers should help parents and students find ways to celebrate and acknowledge learning and growth in lieu of a final grade point average.

On a larger scale, conversations need to be initiated and lobbying should occur to help transform the way credit is awarded at the secondary level and how enrollment processes occur for post-secondary institutions. An effective SBG process relies on descriptive reporting that clearly articulates to what degree a student has learned a particular standard, not the calculation of a percent from points garnered. At the middle school level, credit is not given for coursework so grades do not need to be translated into a traditional grading format. However, at the secondary level, the state mandates for receiving credit aligned to graduation requirements creates a difficulty for schools that want to implement a standards-based system.

Admissions requirements for post-secondary learning require students to include a GPA and/or class ranking with their applications. Standards-based grading in a pure form does not provide these calculations and impedes the translation of secondary performance to colleges and universities. A student who was interviewed for this study highlighted this perspective when he shared the following, “If there was a way to transform how colleges and universities measure success for first year students coming from high school, who's had an SBG experience...if it were
possible to replace the traditional letter grade and GPA system with something that’s more of a wholesale representation of the student, then SBG would make a lot more sense and I think it would be a pretty good way to ensure SBG works the way it's supposed to”. To this student's point, engaging the Association of Governing Boards for Colleges and Universities (AGB) in conversations around accepting descriptive information on the whole student rather than requiring grade calculations could be the start of a national movement to standards-based grading at the secondary levels.

As K-12 organizations implement best practices, such as SBG, to prepare students for post-secondary and life-long learning, college admissions requirements continue to be misaligned to these practices. Collaborating with university leadership and the Association of Governing Boards for Colleges and Universities (AGB) could begin a national movement centered on rethinking college admission criteria that better aligns to the reporting nuances of standards-based grading. A true vertical alignment of k-12 practices to post-secondary expectations would foster the development of 21st century learner attributes, ultimately producing students who are truly life-long learners.

Although this type of change is a lofty goal, it is important to note that the pandemic forced colleges and universities to rethink admission testing requirements as ACT and SAT testing centers were closed. Many incoming freshmen did not have standardized testing scores to submit for consideration. It is understandable that numbers and percentiles give admission officers a platform to sort, order and rank students. But, when forced to do so, secondary organizations were able to modify their enrollment processes. Can post-secondary institutions not only continue with altered pandemic admission processes but look to modify them further by
removing the GPA requirements? This type of restructuring would open the door for more secondary schools to implement standards-based grading with fidelity.

**Legal analysis.** Changing grading policy at the local, state and post-secondary levels would require attention to legal ramifications, particularly in terms of negotiated agreements and teacher evaluation systems. Parameters in contract language that limit the engagement of the board in decisions around grading practices may need to be rethought when these agreements are re-negotiated. This may require legal guidance from district lawyers to truly align district policy on grading practices to their contractual obligations.

Guidance would further be needed on the alignment of teacher evaluation practices to the expectations outlined. Current language in the domains of the evaluation instrument do not include specificity in regards to how teachers provide students with overall marks of proficiency, provide feedback on their learning or what evidences are used in determining overall progress in learning.

**Moral and ethical analysis.** “By its very nature, grading is a subjective process that involves one group of human beings (teachers) making judgements about the performance of another human being” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 194). This does not mean that grades lack credibility or are indefensible. Rather, it implies that grading is and will always be an exercise in professional judgement centered on high moral and ethical obligations. If professional judgements are to be meaningful and accurate, guidance specified in policy should be provided on both state and local levels. Ethically, administrators should oversee the implementation of practices with fidelity and the end goal of enhancing communication on learning should continue to be the impetus of teachers.
Implications for Staff and Community Relationships

Most staff and community members have not had direct experiences or training with a standards-based grading process. “Grading and reporting are of one of an educator’s most important responsibilities and they engage in some form of reporting on a daily basis” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 10). Yet, despite its importance many teachers have not had formalized training on grading. Guskey and Bailey (2001) further explain that research on teacher education suggests that pre-service training in assessment and grading is inadequate. This has resulted in a situation where teachers are managing complexity and ambiguity as they try to solve a problem in the act of working on it. Teachers are still developing standards-based grading practices and often find it difficult to champion its benefits. Administrators should provide professional development while fostering a culture that supports creative and innovative continuous improvement in the area of grading.

Additionally, parents simply don’t “get it”. To no fault of their own, the competency of parents regarding understanding standards-based grading is marginal at best. Although administrators and teachers continue to provide parents with information and explanations regarding SBG, their frustration is hampering their ability to understand the rationale of the change. Helping parents understand that instead of offering a nebulous overall indicator of performance (a final percentage), “SBG provides detailed information on school performance so that remediation and extension efforts can be more targeted and effective” (Guskey & Jung, 2012, p. 118). This perspective can help foster collaboration between teachers and parents.
Conclusion

As the instructional leader of Finlay Middle School, I continually ask myself, “Are the students reaping the benefits of standards-based grading?” I often wonder, if our work is so far outside the cultural norms around grading that the context and culture of our learning community is hampering its effectiveness. However, Odden (2012) states that, “The curriculum that is taught and the instructional approaches to teaching that curriculum are the key factors under the control of the schools (and teachers) that impact student learning. Thus, it makes sense that a detailed and well-articulated view of effective instructional practice would help move student achievement” (Odden, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, “when policies are made that highlight important educational needs, then people start to pay attention, and essential changes are made in practice” (Drago-Severson et al., 2013, p. 237). For these reasons, local and state policy makers should develop standards of practice that align to the philosophical underpinnings of standards-based grading.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

Introduction

The theme for this program evaluation centered on understanding if the theoretical value of standards-based grading outlined in research aligns to the local (student) perspective of its value relative to academic learning and growth. Standards-based grading can help students and teachers think about thinking. Rather than just offering an overall indicator of performance, standards-based grading offers detailed information on individual learning so that improvement efforts can be targeted and effective. Learning is enhanced as students develop an awareness of what they are doing, why they are doing it, where they are going and how they are going there. Furthermore, readiness for learning will inevitably vary for all students. “When systems allow for the variability in readiness, it provides space for academic growth” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 19).

Additionally, the program evaluation attempted to determine if a standards-based grading system can provide the platform for the development of 21st century learner attributes such as self-assessment, self-monitoring and self-directed learning. “Such self-regulation, or metacognitive skills, are one of the ultimate goals of all learning; they are what we often mean by ‘lifelong learning’ and it is why we want students to become their own teachers” (Hattie, 2012, p.115). Lifelong learning translates into post-secondary success in college and careers. This is supported in Thomas Friedman’s article, How to Get a Job at Google, in which he shared “in an age when innovation is increasingly a group endeavor, it also cares about a lot of soft skills — leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability and loving to learn and relearn. This will be true no matter where you go to work” (Friedman, 2014, p.11). “When teachers, processes and
procedures help students understand themselves as a learner, they help them build the capacity to make wise decisions and navigate a turbulent and rapidly changing world” (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017, p. 4).

Discussion

After a long history of traditional grading practices, Finlay Middle School and Lincoln High School transitioned to a standards-based grading model in all grade levels and content areas. Prior to full implementation, professional development opportunities encouraged teachers to re-think the purpose of grading and encouraged the development of a common philosophy around the purpose of grading. Without formalized training or discussion, students found themselves dropped into a new accountability system that drastically differed from what they had experienced with traditional grading practices. My research questions focused on students’ perceptions of the strengths of the system, areas of improvement and the possible influence it may have on the development of 21st century skills.

During interview discussions, students had an opportunity to offer insights into their personal experiences and perspectives that provided evidence for the following research questions: What are the attitudes and experiences of secondary students impacted by a standards-based grading system? What are students’ perceptions of the strengths of a standards-based grading model?, What are students’ perceptions of areas of improvement in the standards-based grading model?, and What are students' perceptions on whether or not a standards-based grading system helps to develop 21st century learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-teaching?

An analysis of students’ interview responses revealed the following perceptions on the strengths of a standards-based grading system:
• In a standards-based grading system, the whole student is considered and each can learn at their own pace.

• In a standards-based grading system, students can engage in content in ways that deepen learning.

• Standards based grading is not just about achievement, but about growth as a learner.

• Standards based grading supports the emotional development of students as learners.

• Feedback on learning is enhanced through teacher and student collaboration in a standards-based grading system.

As students shared their experiences with SBG, they provided insight into how the system can promote the development of 21st century learner attributes. Students were able to articulate skills and learner attributes that they acquired through their experiences with SBG. Students discussed being self-aware, knowing if they are studying correctly, valuing communication with their teachers, being self-directed and understanding in what areas they excel and in what areas they need to improve. It is clear that the structure of standards-based grading provides the space and opportunity for students to invest in their own learning and promotes the development of learner behaviors.

Students’ responses regarding areas of improvement were analyzed and served as the background for program recommendations based on Wagner’s (2012) 4Cs—context, conditions, competencies and culture. An organizational change plan emerged that centered on improvements that develop the identified strengths of the system and enhance overall communication of learning and growth. These changes will positively impact the development
of 21st century learner attributes by creating an arena in which students, and parents, are informed participants in learning and they can monitor, adjust and refine their work as needed. The following actions were recommended:

- Reduce ambiguity in learning expectations by clearly articulating learning expectations and scaffolding success criteria on a continuum of learning that moves students towards the expectations of the broader learning standard.
- Improve progress monitoring through the use of formative assessments, quality rubrics and increased opportunities for students to showcase learning and provide evidence of their growth.
- Provide uniform experiences for students by promoting conformity in implementation across teachers, subjects and classrooms.
- Improve the quality of feedback on learning progress by reducing the broadness in levels of proficiency by providing detailed success criteria and/or implementing more success categories.
- Focus on differentiation and development of enrichment opportunities when students are attaining learning expectations early on.
- Allow time for teachers to provide narrative feedback on students’ evidence and integrate student-teacher conferencing and collaboration.
- Educate stakeholders on the philosophical underpinnings of a standards-based grading system to enhance their understanding and promote parent involvement.

Using the information gained from this study as a basis of the argument, it is recommended that grading and reporting be recognized as integral parts of teaching and learning and suggested that policy makers develop standards of practice that align to the philosophical
underpinnings of standards-based grading. According to Guskey and Bailey (2001), “grading and reporting policies and practices tend to be fragmented, ambiguous and confusing to parents, students and some teachers” (Guskey & Bailey, 2001, p. 190). This ambiguity is not only found amongst classrooms in a school building but across districts, states and countries. When policies lack appropriate detail regarding grading and reporting expectations, it further exacerbates the ambiguity and confusion for students and parents. Furthermore, the lack of clarity in demonstrating the link between grading, instruction and learning can be misleading and detrimental to the achievement for all students.

Locally, school boards should consider including language in policy not only centered on promotional guidance or modification of grade reports, but also to include the philosophical impetus for grading and how it is an integral part of the educational philosophy and strategic plan. A clearly articulated district philosophy on the purpose of grading and guidelines for grade reporting would provide direction for administrators and teachers to implement more accurate and consistent reports on student achievement relative to state and local learning standards. This consistent reporting can better inform instructional strategies needed for intervention or enrichment.

**Leadership Lessons**

As a leader, understanding the costs and benefits of change is imperative as the deluge of change is real in education. In From Leading to Succeeding (2016), a change in grading practices is considered a high benefit, low-cost initiative that deserves the focus and attention of an educational system. Douglas Reeves adds, “It costs nothing to change the grading scale and it costs very little to change the philosophical purpose of homework” (Reeves, 2016, p. 82). However, the transition is not easy and leaders shouldn’t consider it “low hanging fruit”.

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Persuading stakeholders that standards-based grading is a high benefit, low-cost initiative is incredibly difficult and requires tenacity, collaboration and courage.

“Real change requires leading people into the unknown, where they have to confront and change their own values and beliefs about teaching and learning” (Goodwin, Cameron & Hein, 2015, p. 38). Grading is a very public display of personal information and it is deep rooted in traditional beliefs about teaching and learning. Leading change in this area requires attending to shifts in the personal paradigms of all stakeholders: parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members.

Heifetz et al. (2009), share that “the most common failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges if they were technical problems” (Heifetz et al, 2009, p. 19). They define technical problems as those that can be solved with existing knowledge; adaptive challenges require solutions that fall outside the current mode of operation. Furthermore, in order for adaptive challenges to be addressed “there must be changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p.19). Tossing out a traditional grading system in favor of a standards-based grading system presents both technical and adaptive challenges and effective leadership requires focusing on the needs that each challenge presents. Therefore, a paramount concern for leaders is to consider the overall context of a change in grading philosophy and the personal implications on stakeholders. “Whether they are likely to view the change as a relatively straightforward next step or as a discomfiting, personally and professionally challenging break from the past” (Goodwin et al, 2015, p.39).

Additionally, overhauling a grading and reporting system is hard work, not because it is intellectually or technically difficult, but because it “challenge’s individuals’ and organizations’ investments in relationships, competence and identity” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p.23). It is
a challenge in which the problem itself is muddy, limited exemplars of implementation exist and it requires new and more complex internal capacities. It is a challenge that is truly adaptive in nature and “requires solving problems in the act of working on them “(Drago-Severson et al., 2013, p. 56).

This experience has taught me that being an adaptive leader is paramount to the success of implementation of programming such as standards-based grading. Finding comfort in the disequilibrium is a must as it allows you to help stakeholders navigate the change. Therefore, a leadership lesson learned centers on honoring the reality that “adaptive change is accompanied by distress” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 29). One must have compassion for the distress and realize that this type of change requires staff, students and parents to not just develop skills and competencies (informational learning) but to become transformational learners.

In Learning for Leadership, transformational learning is defined as increases in cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities to manage the complexities of an adaptive challenge (Drago-Severson et al, 2013, p. 57). As a leader managing a change of this magnitude, one must recognize the personal and complex nature of the task at hand. I have enhanced my own leadership skills by developing an understanding of the principles of constructive-developmental theory; the process of a person’s meaning-making system and the lens through which all life experiences are filtered (Drago-Severson et al, 2013, p. 58). Going forward as a leader, these principles will guide my work to create stakeholder opportunities for dialogue and collaboration to unify understandings, differentiate education and training to address diverse ways of knowing and provide safe spaces for students, teachers and parents to provide feedback on their experiences.
Conclusion

George Couros states, “One of the best ways for leaders to take notice of, and even discover, new and better opportunities is to experience life from the end user’s viewpoint” (Couros, 2015, p. 82). This program evaluation was intended to understand if the end users (students) were reaping the benefits of a standards-based grading system as outlined in educational research. Although there are areas of improvement with implementation, I am confident that students’ learning and growth is positively impacted by the system.

Additionally, the program evaluation was intended to determine if students’ experiences with the system provided a platform for the development of 21st century learner attributes. In the Leader’s Guide to 21st Century Learning, Kay and Greenhill shared that “leading districts are creating innovative practices and are breaking new ground in embedding 21st century education into curriculum and assessments” (Kay & Greenhill, 2013, p. XVI). After analyzing students’ experiences, I believe that a standards-based grading system is an innovative practice that provides the conduit through which students can develop learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-teaching.

For these reasons, I would encourage leaders to challenge long-standing grading practices and commit to investing in this high-benefit practice. A student supports this claim by stating, “I'm glad I've had the experience because I've noticed that it's easier for me to master skills, probably because of the communication and the reflection, and there's also a lot of room for growth”.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Face-to-Face Semi Structured Interview Questions
Student Perspectives on Standards-Based Grading and the
Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes:
Interviewer: Michelle Blackley

Date: ______________________ Start Time: ____________ End Time:_________________

The intent of the following questions is to provide a common platform from which clarifying
questions that deepen understanding can be asked.

What grade are currently in?
What is your ethnicity?
With which gender do you identify?
What math course are you currently enrolled?

Have you experienced a traditional grading system? (The calculation of percentages and then the
assignment of letter grades) A, B,C,... If yes, for how many years?

How many courses, or school years, have you experienced a standards-based grading and
reporting system?

What is the purpose of a grade in a course?

Can you explain how standards-based grading works?

Do you understand how you are doing in a class better with standards-based grading than you
did with traditional grades? Please explain

Do standards-based grades help you to know what you need to work on and improve better than
traditional grades? Can you give an example?

Has separating behaviors like homework completion, participation and preparedness from the
overall grade helped you understand your grades better?

How has reporting on learner behaviors such as homework completion, participation and
preparedness impacted you as a student?

How has standards-based grading impacted how you communicate with your parents about
school?

How has standards-based grading helped you learn more in your courses? Please explain.
Educational research suggests that a standards-based grading system can help students *learn how to learn* and to use 21st century learner attributes such as self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-teaching. How has standards-based grading impacted your development of these skills?

Overall, what are the strengths of a standards-based grading system?

Overall, what are the downside of a standards-based grading system?
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Dear Students and Parents:

My name is Michelle Blackley, I am the principal of Daniel Wright Junior High and also a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am reaching out to you to ask for your participation in my research study, *Student Perspectives on Standards-Based Grading and the Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes* occurring from May 2020 to May 2021.

The purpose of this study is to understand students’ perspectives on whether or not a standards-based grading model enhances academic learning and promotes the development of 21st century learner attributes. Learner attributes are skills such as self-monitoring, self-evaluating, self-assessing and self-teaching.

The study will help administrators not only better understand the strengths and weaknesses of standards-based grading but also understand how students perceive its impact on their achievement and growth as learners. This information will provide guidance on ongoing professional development for teachers and needed support for students. The study will also contribute to the body of literature centered on the implementation of standards-based grading in secondary schools.

This form is intended to outline the purpose of the study as well as provide a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. Participation in this study will provide you with a unique opportunity to voice your perceptions and opinions about the standards-based grading system. It will provide you with an opportunity to think deeply about and respond to your experiences. Your participation may clarify the intentions of standards-based grading and possibly influence your overall perceptions in a positive way. Furthermore, your input can contribute to improvements in the execution of a standards-based grading system in a way that is beneficial for all students.

I am aware that as the researcher, I am also your neighbor and principal in the learning community in which you live. Because of this, I am attuned to the fact that this may affect the information you are willing to share. Conversely, because I am familiar to you and we have both academic and personal connections, your responses may be more honest and genuine.

Potential risks to your anonymity will be mitigated by keeping all interview transcripts and coding sheets confidential and locked in my home office space. Your names will be replaced with alphanumeric labels and only I will have access to the audio recordings on a password protected personal device. All collected data will be reported in aggregate and any information or labels used to identify individuals will be removed. Furthermore, data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Participation in this study will include:

- One individual face-to-face interview with Michelle Blackley. It will be scheduled at your convenience, from May 2020 through May 2021. The interviews will last up to 60 minutes and include approximately 12 questions regarding standards-based grading.
- Face-to-face interviews will be recorded. Interview data will be reported in aggregate and any information or labels used to identify individuals will be
removed. Participant names will be replaced with alphanumeric labels and only I will have access to the audio recordings on a password protected personal device.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, employed to inform standards-based grading practices within the district and/or provide insight to other schools and school districts looking to initiate a standards-based grading program.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. To request results from the study and/or get additional information regarding the study, please contact me, Michelle Blackley, at [email] or [email]

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that have not been addressed by me, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Don Angelaccio, donald.angelaccio@d2l.nl.edu or the co-chairs of NLU’s Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526; or Dr. Kathleen Cornett; email: kcornett@nl.edu; phone: (844) 380-5001. Co-chairs are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.

Michelle Blackley
By completing and returning the form below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Michelle Blackley, doctoral student at National Louis University, Chicago. Forms can be mailed to:

Students: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study “Student Perspectives on Standards-Based Grading and the Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes”. My participation will consist of the activities below during a scheduled interview between June 2020 and May 2021.

- One individual face-to-face interview with Michelle Blackley scheduled at your convenience.
- Interviews will last up to 60min. and include approximately 12 questions to understand students’ perceptions.
- Face-to-face interviews will be recorded. Interview data will be reported in aggregate and any information or labels used to identify individuals will be removed. Participant names will be replaced with alphanumeric labels and only I will have access to the audio recordings on a password protected personal device.

Participant’s Printed Name: ______________________________________________________

Participant’s Email Address: _____________________________________________________

_______________________________________     _________________     ________________
Participant’s Signature                   Date of Birth                Date of Signature

Parents or Guardians: I understand that by signing below, I am giving consent for my minor child to participate in the study “Student Perspectives on Standards-Based Grading and the Development of 21st Century Learner Attributes” as outlined above.

Parent or Guardian Email : ______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________     ________________
Parent or Guardian’s Signature            Date of Signature