

GRADING

From the
Inside Out

Bringing Accuracy to Student Assessment
Through a Standards-Based Mindset

TOM SCHIMMER

An abstract graphic design featuring overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes and circles in various shades of gray and black. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is dynamic and modern, with a focus on clean lines and geometric forms.



CHAPTER 3

Five Myths of Standards-Based Grading

In the “real world” timelines are frequently negotiated (real estate, legal matters) or adjusted to circumstances (contractors and consultants); deadlines range from fixed to considerably flexible. . . . We prepare students better for the real world when we offer a variety of deadlines in school.

—Ken O’Connor

The good news about standards-based grading is that there is more local control over grading decisions than teachers may first realize. The downside of local decision making is the potential to lose sight of the core fundamentals that ensure standards-based grading is an effective and accurate way of reporting student proficiency. With so many possible variations in implementation, standards-based grading could take on multiple forms that result in misalignment between schools or even within the same school.

When any idea is unsuccessfully executed, it is typical to find fault with the idea, not with implementation. Educators often judge standards-based grading on interpretation and implementation of the ideas in the classroom, not on the merits of the ideas themselves. Unfortunately, this can lead to false indications of what standards-based grading actually is and how successful it has been for the individual teacher. For example, if the practice of reassessment is unsuccessful, some would blame the practice rather than its implementation, even when other teachers do implement it successfully. This can spawn myths that eventually lead to the dismissal of otherwise sound practices.

I intentionally explore these myths up front in this book. Addressing them first allows me to explore the topics in subsequent chapters without *what ifs* and *yeah, buts* to taint readers' perceptions of a new grading paradigm. These myths can quickly take hold within a school or district and make the implementation of sound grading practices exponentially more difficult. Remember, standards-based grading is about accurately reporting levels of proficiency, regardless of how long it took for students to master a skill or how slow they started out. It is up to the teacher, school, or district to determine how to get to accuracy. Context, the nature of the subject, and the students' ages will drive the systems, routines, and processes for getting to accuracy.

Whether teachers purposefully defend the status quo or get caught up in a myth-based narrative, it is critical that those seeking to implement more effective grading practices be clear on what sound grading practices are and are not. Despite what some might think, standards-based grading is not about making it easier for students to pass. It's not about creating more work for the teacher. It does not ask teachers to grade identically. It still holds students accountable, and it aligns with what students will experience after graduation.

Researchers have only begun to study standards-based grading, but their work does reveal two things. First, it has shown that the emergent standards-based learning culture has largely succeeded in changing teachers' attitudes about grading. Second, it reveals that maintaining the scrutiny with which we examine standards-based grading is necessary since even teachers who claim to grade only on achievement still employ practices that don't entirely meet those criteria (Brookhart, 2013b). Because of a lack of published research, the common grading myths that follow have emerged from my own experience, my observations of others' implementation efforts, and the personal experiences of implementers at the classroom and school levels.

Myth 1: Standards-Based Grading Makes It Easier for Students

It's true—standards-based grading can result in more students reaching proficiency, but a collective movement to standards-based instruction has nothing to do with making school easier for students; it's about more students reaching proficiency through authentic demonstrations of learning. Rather than simply accumulating the requisite number of points or averaging out to a passing grade, students must now reach a minimal level of proficiency on a maximum number of subject-specific standards. If anything, passing has become *more* rigorous as teachers look beyond the numbers to identify the specific areas of strength and weakness as they relate to the standards of learning within each subject.

Mediocrity Is Not Acceptable

The identification of standards and their specific components has allowed teachers to see more clearly where students are along their individual learning progressions. Some teachers have simply stopped accepting and grading substandard work. Don't confuse this refusal with being punitive; instead think of the work as simply not being ready for summative grading. If we accept mediocrity, then we send the message that mediocrity is acceptable; it's

not. Those who refuse to accept mediocrity promote continual growth by asking students to keep trying and learning in order to bring their assignments up to an acceptable level. That's not easy.

Standards-based grading also has nothing to do with dumbing down or lowering standards. At some point, not good enough has to truly become *not good enough*, with the expectation that learning is never finished. Timelines, deadlines, grading periods, and reporting cycles are the realities of the system, so we know that learning cannot, in a practical sense, go on forever. That said, within those recognized restraints, refusing to accept subpar demonstrations of learning by students raises the standards of rigor within a classroom. Teachers should expect nothing less than the best from students, and while each student has an individual best, the only way students will learn that teachers expect high-quality performances from them is to hear "Not yet" when they turn in assignments that need more time and attention.

Failure Is Still Possible

Another aspect of the myth that standards-based grading is easier is the notion that no one fails. We must address this topic, but I do not mean it to become a distraction. Failure is still technically possible, and this section is in no way an endorsement for retention.

Students earn a passing grade when the teacher determines they have presented a sufficient amount of evidence (at a sufficient level) to justify a passing grade. If a student has not submitted enough evidence or has ultimately not reached the defined minimal level of proficiency, then the student doesn't pass. How this is handled depends on the age of the student and the extent of the failure.

This is especially tricky for elementary and middle school students since research favors nonretention policies. At best, retention has no positive effect on student outcomes (Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005); at worst, retention produces negative academic and personal outcomes (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001; Westbury, 1994). High school educators must also be aware that retention late in a student's academic career can have a significant impact on academic attainment (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). So if students technically fail but are socially promoted with peers, what are teachers and schools to do?

One possibility would be more effective communication that the student hasn't technically passed; educators must obviously do this with care and finesse. It is counterproductive for students and parents to assume a student has met the majority of standards simply because he or she has reached the next grade level. Teachers already know this information on an intimate level; what's missing is an efficient and effective process for communicating it. The local school culture and the established routines of communication largely dictate how this might unfold.

No-fail policies are one reason some push back against standards-based grading. Predetermined no-fail policies might seem to pass the confidence test, but they fall short of passing the accuracy test. Even when teachers do everything to prevent failure, some students still fall short of expected performance levels. The standards-based instructional paradigm does make it easier to identify the specific standards with which a student is struggling, but

the sheer number of standards, along with the variety of proficiency levels students display at the next grade level, can challenge teachers. Eliminating failure is always our goal, but it's important to know that the elimination of failure is not a given of standards-based grading. If no one fails, it's because each student reached the minimal level of proficiency, not because the teacher wouldn't allow it.

Grading Dilemma: Handling Failure

So how do you handle failure in your own context? While learning is continual, the school year, as it currently exists in most schools and districts, is finite. At the end of the year, what happens when a student clearly has not turned in the requisite number of assignments or falls short of proficiency on the minimum number of standards required to justify a passing grade? The age and maturity of the student dictate the established routines to communicate this lack of success. Still, it is important to continually reflect on how we can improve the clarity of our communication with both students and parents. This is a challenge, since students may lose hope over communication that is too direct and misunderstand a message that is too cryptic. Again, we know that this message is likely more direct in high school settings as it becomes more obvious through our methods of reporting (as discussed in upcoming chapters). While failure may be easier to identify in a standards-based culture, students have the potential to react negatively regardless of age. Here are three items to consider.

- *Do you communicate failure with finesse to avoid diminishing or shattering student confidence?*
- *How effective and efficient is your internal communication regarding students who move from one grade to the next without sufficiently meeting the majority of grade-level standards? Is your communication more or less efficient and effective with external transitions (such as elementary to middle school or middle school to high school)?*
- *What steps could you take to ensure that your communication of students' lack of proficiency is more effective, efficient, and productive?*

Myth 2: Standards-Based Grading Is More Work for the Teacher

If implementing standards-based grading is more work, then teachers might not be implementing it correctly. Admittedly, it's easier to refuse late work, use zeros, calculate averages, and disallow reassessment, but conversations about what *more work* means need some contextual interpretation. It's important to recognize that the best interests of students and the best interests of teachers' workloads can, at times, be at odds; what is most *efficient* for teachers is sometimes not most *effective* for students.

It's Different Work, Not More Work

Once the dust settles on the implementation of standards-based grading, many teachers find it's no more or less work; it's just a different routine. On the one hand, teachers might offer students reassessment opportunities (more grading) but they may have also moved away from grading everything students produce in favor of more formative assessment work (less grading). It really is a question of how teachers want to distribute their time. If the workload is skewed in the direction of the teacher, then it's likely students aren't involved enough in the process of grading. While students shouldn't be grading themselves, teachers can most certainly ease their workload by teaching them how to self- and peer-assess, especially during the formative assessment process.

It is prudent to examine students' assessment and grading practices holistically. Grading practices are just one part of a teacher's overall instructional paradigm, and they can consider them contextually. We know that the middle of any implementation effort always feels messy. Until the new practices become habit, they will feel forced, artificial, and like more work, especially for teachers with many years of established traditional grading practices under their belts.

New Practices Need New Routines

If four of thirty students submit a required assignment late, the teacher is not doing more work. When the assignments were originally due, we might say that the teacher was four short; the late assignments only bring the amount of work to the same level it would have been had every student met the deadline. However, what can inadvertently become more work is the process the teacher goes through to finally receive those late assignments.

The successful implementation of any new practice is often only as effective as the routines, processes, and systems designed to support those using it. Without a new routine, the new practice is doomed to fail. Creating sustainable routines for teachers is important to ensure long-term success of a new grading paradigm. These new systems begin with the teachers identifying what they need to sustain implementation of the new practice. From there, conversations shift to grade levels, departments, and even the staff as a whole. At some point, school administration must be part of this process in order to create a cohesive system that effectively responds if, for example, students miss deadlines and don't respond to the teacher's initial efforts.

Shifting to a standards-based culture of grading is much more than implementing one practice in isolation; it requires a comprehensive approach. Expecting immediate, sweeping shifts from one practice (such as no zeros) is unrealistic. Teachers can't simply implement a no-penalties policy and then back away and watch it unfold (or unravel). Each new practice needs a replacement routine, which I explore throughout this book. Many of these replacement routines will be acceptable alternatives that bridge the gap between the teacher's current grading mindset and a desirable one. These alternatives are especially helpful in the early stages of implementation when teachers may feel daunted by the emotional commitment of leaping to any new practice.

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So often when I talk with other teachers about standards-based grading, they say “It’s a good idea but I don’t have the time,” or “Aren’t you doing a lot of extra work?” Nothing could be further from the truth! Once I implemented standards-based grading, I found that I have *more* time and there is no “extra work” because how I spend my time has completely changed.

Now my time is spent designing assessments and planning instruction that is focused on clear learning targets, which are congruent to the standards for the course. I am focused on what is necessary for students to show mastery of the learning targets—as are my students—and standards-based grading practices allow this to occur more easily.

I used to spend hours every night grading homework. Much of that time was spent trying to determine if I was being consistent in how I assigned points. I was more focused on what I thought was fair and what the numerical grade should be, rather than providing the feedback students really needed to improve. I also allowed behaviors to be part of the grade; did the student participate or was the assignment submitted on time? While these things are important, I decided their grades should be based on whether or not the student had mastered the content.

Now, I no longer assign a point value for homework; I provide feedback using comments and a non-numeric coding system, which I share with parents and students at the beginning of the semester so that all stakeholders understand that the grade is based on what the student knows. The non-numeric coding has allowed me to track student behaviors, which do influence learning, so I can discuss issues and successes with my students. This actually takes less time and is easier than when I assigned points. I’m focused on individual student work, and the feedback is specific to the needs of that student.

The grading of tests is easier as well. Now I’m focused on whether the student has mastered the intended learning and what evidence I have to support that claim. If a student hasn’t mastered the learning yet, then he will have other opportunities to practice, retest, and show me his learning.

Another myth is that retesting creates more work. With my retesting policy, the student, not me, does the work. In order to show mastery, some students will need more practice and more experiences with the content than other students. These experiences may vary from more time in the lab to talking with me about a concept or how to solve a problem. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, I provide feedback and guidance to each student. The time I spend facilitating the practice and retesting is much less than the time I used to spend assigning points to homework.

For me, standards-based grading is much easier, less time consuming, and more specific to the needs of the individual student. Students get multiple opportunities to show me that they have mastered the learning. This has been very liberating as I find myself having more time to spend working with my students than I did in the past!

Myth 3: There Is Only One Way to Implement Standards-Based Grading

So much of what educators call standards-based grading is the cumulative effect of local decisions that eventually became the norm. Don't always take the commonalities between schools as hard and fast rules for standards-based grading. Statements like, "You can't ever grade homework," or "The most recent evidence is always most accurate" sound correct and may represent how the vast majority implement standards-based grading, but they are not definitive rules to follow; there is some nuance to this process that we must explore.

Our goal is to accurately report student proficiency while maintaining students' confidence in their continued growth. Beyond that, the decisions about grading practices are more local than universal. The end result may be universal—accurate grades—but the practices to achieve accuracy vary according to context. This is good news for teachers; especially those who resist standards-based grading because they believe that the goal is to standardize grading practices. There is no question that consistency among teachers teaching the same students or subject is beneficial, but uniformity is unnecessary.

Every grading decision we make has consequences. Decide to grade homework and there will be a resulting consequence; decide not to grade homework and there will be a different resulting consequence. As teachers audit their grading practices to uncover those that support the true north of accuracy and confidence, the important question to consider is whether each grading practice enhances or diminishes the ability to accurately report proficiency. I identify the consequences of these decisions throughout the book as I explore specific practices and acceptable alternatives.

As long as grading practices don't undermine accuracy and confidence, teachers should autonomously choose the practices that they believe work in the best interest of the students they're working with. Anchoring grading decisions with accuracy and confidence insulates teachers from making grading choices that have the potential to undercut a student's self-efficacy.

Myth 4: Students Are No Longer Held Accountable

What exactly does it mean to hold students accountable? Educators use the phrase often, but they rarely reflect on what it actually means. Standards-based grading still holds students accountable, but with a new definition of accountability. I explore how teachers can redefine accountability more thoroughly in chapter 7; here it is only important to know that the notion of students not being held accountable is a myth. Accountability is redefined, not eliminated.

Accountability can be carried out through different avenues, so having a working definition of accountability is crucial. Two teachers might agree that students need to be held accountable, thinking they are on the same page, and yet, for each, *accountability* means something different. One may think of accountability as consequences for behavioral missteps while another may view accountability as the belief that all learning is essential: same

word, two different working definitions. Being held accountable for irresponsible behavior does not have to equate to experiencing a punitive consequence.

The focus on learning brought about by the standards movement encourages educators to examine evidence of learning holistically and in its totality rather than mathematically combining tasks that represent part of the same standards. The task completion paradigm focuses on students completing all tasks in order to earn the necessary credit, points, and percentages teachers use to calculate a grade. They emphasize getting it done in order to fill empty spots in the gradebook. The focus on learning shifts teachers from a task completion paradigm to a learning paradigm.

The *learning* paradigm recognizes that many tasks represent overlapping standards. Rather than emphasizing completion of every single task, teachers focus on identifying necessary evidence. This is a different way to prioritize. If students are likely to address missing evidence in an upcoming assignment, the teacher could decide that the missing task students haven't completed is unnecessary; alternatively, the teacher might consider the missing task critical and take every step to ensure the students complete it.

What teachers see as consequences may not actually be such for students. Most teachers would see a zero as a consequence, but the zero may actually allow the student to opt out of the assignment, especially if the net result of the zero is a grade that is still acceptable; that's not accountability, that's just punishment. Real accountability means teachers deem no essential evidence or demonstrations optional and that students are responsible for all of the learning.

Again, in standards-based grading, students are still held accountable, responsibility is still important, and deadlines still matter. It's a different kind of accountability, one that I explore in more depth in chapter 7.

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"But they won't do the work if it's not for a grade." I've heard that statement ad nauseam during my teaching career. There was even a time when I believed it, too. Now I know better because my students do their work without receiving a grade.

In fact, it is rare for a teacher to give an assignment just for a grade. Teachers assign work for practice, to assess current student understanding, and to prepare for the next day's lesson. However, somewhere along the way, we've stopped communicating this to our students.

I began to tell my students why I was assigning the work—to help them master the targets! I began to change my classroom culture so that mistakes were expected and even celebrated as learning opportunities. And, I changed my classroom culture by holding students accountable for completing the work. I had to show them how the work I assigned gave me valuable information on what they understood and where they were struggling. I had to show them there was value in the work. Students will do work when it has value for them. Many fail to see the value and so decide, Why do it?

Still, not every student gladly completes the work. The question then becomes, How do I hold them accountable? Traditionally, the answer would be to punish them with a low grade, or better yet, a zero. However, that doesn't help anyone. It lets the student off the hook for doing the work, and it doesn't tell me what they do or do not understand. So, in my classroom, the consequence for not doing the work is to do the work! If they haven't done the work, students lose their break or incentive time or they eat lunch in my room until they complete the work. This is non-negotiable.

What I have found is that these behavioral consequences mean a lot more to my students than any academic ones. They pay the penalty with the most valuable commodity they have: their time. While this approach hasn't made all of my students complete 100 percent of their work, I now have less trouble with work completion than ever before. I also have students who understand that the work (the practice) is designed to get them ready for the target assessments (the performance).

Myth 5: Students Will Be Unprepared for the Real World

The debate among educators about what students experience after graduation is both inevitable and the reason some are cautious about a standards-based approach to grading. As the argument goes, all of the second chances, the so-called lack of accountability, and the disregard for deadlines leave students unprepared to tackle the realities of life in the real world. If we ignore deadlines as adults, they argue, we will eventually be fired. While that may be true in some cases, the argument is futile because the idea that deadlines don't matter in standards-based grading is a myth, one that turns some teachers against standards-based grading. The concern among teachers about real-world preparation, however, is very real.

A Real Concern

The truth is we should all be concerned. School is not a way to make students experience an early version of adulthood, but we would be remiss if we didn't pay some attention to the potential impact our practices have on a student's ability to succeed after graduation. The limitation of the real-world argument is that students cannot learn every life lesson before graduation and that our human stages of development prevent us all from fully grasping the content and context of these life lessons prior to experiencing them.

As well, if teachers are going to proclaim the importance of these life lessons, habits, and characteristics, then they need to be purposeful about it rather than waiting for arbitrary student stumbles to provide an opportunity. If these skills and habits are so critical to the success of our students after graduation, then leaving it all to chance seems odd. The way we teach and assess proficiency is also the way we can teach and assess important life skills. We would never leave argumentative writing to chance, so why would we do it with something as important as the lesson of responsibility? We should intentionally teach the habits and

attributes that ensure students are ready for life after high school, then assess them with accuracy and develop them through support and instruction.

The Illusion of the Real World

In the business world, great managers capitalize on individual strengths, pull the triggers necessary to activate those strengths, and tailor their coaching to employees' unique learning styles (Buckingham, 2005). The most productive growth environments are the ones where employees see constructive feedback as a source of empowerment rather than criticism (Walker, 2002). From their perspective, the most productive work environments are supportive, strength-based, and often personalized. That doesn't look at all like the real world described by many educators. In their descriptions, the real world is cutthroat and heartless, but a closer examination of some major corporations (such as Google) reveals a different story. If educators aren't careful, their depictions become more a threat of an unknowable future than a real guide to life after high school—more illusion than reality. Sure, not all work environments are ideal, and less-than-desirable managerial practices certainly exist, but that doesn't mean students are guaranteed to experience them after graduation.

In fact, much of the so-called real world is standards based. Whether it's a driving test, the bar exam, a pilot's license, or a whole host of other personal and professional hoops, credentials for employment are often grounded in the same principles as standards-based grading; one either meets the standard or doesn't. As well, when one finally meets the standard, the new result does not typically mingle with any previous results. Standards-based grading accurately reflects a student's level of proficiency without interference from other sources. The evaluator must separate unrelated, nonstandard aspects to ensure the clarity of what's being determined and ultimately reported. What's interesting is that some who push back against standards-based grading feel the separation reduces the significance of the important, real-world attributes that students need to develop to be successful as adults; the truth is it doesn't.

To become successful adults, students need to learn how to manage their time, be respectful, maximize their efforts toward a task, and be dependable members of a team; no one disputes this. The real question is, How? How do teachers most effectively instill these important attributes in their students? Again, if these characteristics and attributes are critical, then we must be willing to give them the attention they deserve, something I will discuss in more depth in chapter 9.

Personal Reflection: Making Predictions

I admit it—I have been guilty of making predictions about what a student will be like as an employee. It seemed logical that I could examine a student's academic results and corresponding attributes and know what kind of adult he or she would be. On more than one occasion, however, I've been proven wrong not years later, but in the same moments I was making those predictions.

Many high school students are employed part time, and what we find out about their work life outside of school might surprise us. Sometimes the student whose writing assignments are always late is the same employee who never misses a shift at the local grocery store. Sometimes the student who is less than enthusiastic about using the quadratic formula just got promoted to assistant manager at the local fast food restaurant. While these circumstances may not be true of every student who falls short of expectations, I have found that they are not as rare as we might think either.

Some of our students are already in the real world and are actually quite successful. We risk our credibility when our predictions don't match the student's current reality. When our predictions are grounded, thoughtful, and provide missing information that the student is not yet aware of, then they can serve a productive purpose. However, if our predictions are simply designed to scare students about their potential failures going forward, then they're misguided. This constant look to the future distracts us from our primary responsibility of ensuring students' success. The best preparation for success tomorrow is success and confidence today. Scaring students about the future is counterproductive.

Children Are Not Wired Like Adults

In his October 2011 *National Geographic* article "Beautiful Brains," David Dobbs explains that our brains undergo what he refers to as a "massive reorganization between our 12th and 25th year" and that "as we move through adolescence, the brain undergoes extensive remodeling, resembling a network and wiring upgrade" (p. 43). This massive reorganization helps make clear why teenagers often engage in behaviors adults would rarely consider.

The truth is that the teenage brain is not simply an early version of the adult brain; it's different. As such, it's difficult for teenagers to see the world the way adults do. If the twenty-fifth year is the end of the reorganization of the brain, it's no wonder most teenagers can't truly relate to adult life responsibilities. By the twenty-fifth year, most adults are at least seven years removed from high school, which means adult-referenced conversations during high school, while noble and well intentioned, are often premature.

What About College?

The most immediate real-world concern for students typically involves college and university attendance. Will students who experience standards-based grading face disadvantages after graduating from high school? Many adults recall their own grading experiences while in university and worry that standards-based grading is too soft and will leave students unprepared for the rigor of the collegiate learning and grading experience. I would argue that the granular nature of standards-based grading and the separation of important attributes could result in students being *more* prepared, as they would have a clearer picture of both their academic proficiency and their behavioral readiness. A student with high proficiency but low-level attributes would know that more attention, effort, focus, commitment, and even organization could be necessary for success at the next level. A student with lower proficiency (still high enough to gain acceptance into college) but high-level attributes would

know that the habits and skills are there, but more focus on content proficiency and mastery will be required as workloads increase.

If standards-based grading leaves students unprepared for college or their careers, then it's an implementation issue. Those who argue unpreparedness only succeed in fear mongering, making others so anxious that they are unable to thoughtfully examine any idea—including standards-based grading (Kotter & Whitehead, 2010). It's one thing to raise authentic concerns over the long-term implications of any change in practice; it's quite another to raise anxieties to irrational levels through fear about what students might experience in the future.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), freshmen are graded only on a pass or no-record basis during the first semester; the second semester allows for A–C or no-record grading. Regular A–F grading begins in a student's sophomore year. More details on MIT's grading policies can be found on their website (<http://web.mit.edu/registrar/reg/grades/policies.html>). Wellesley College (Wellesley, Massachusetts) uses shadow grades for first-year students. Similar to MIT, first-year students will, on their transcripts, receive a pass or no pass in all of their courses. However, students are given a report of the letter grades they would have received, but this information is only for the student and will never appear on the transcript or be released under any other circumstances. For a full description of Wellesley College's shadow grade system, visit their website (www.wellesley.edu/registrar/grading/grading_policy/shadow_grading_policy).

MIT and Wellesley College are just two examples, and while so many other universities and colleges may still use traditional grading systems, these examples do show that some schools—even prestigious schools—are willing to rethink the grading paradigm to best serve their students.

How to Bring Parents on Board

Sometimes too little information is worse than no information. Too little information can leave parents uniquely susceptible to the myths of standards-based grading. Since parents are not directly involved in the day-to-day decisions made in classrooms and schools, information reaches them through unpredictable and atypical means. Once a myth about standards-based grading takes hold in a parent community, it can be especially difficult to uproot. It doesn't take long to figure out that the most efficient means of derailing the implementation of any new idea is to rally the parent community against it.

Myths usually develop from misinformation and exaggerations, so teachers and principals would be wise to include parents at all discussion points along the implementation continuum, as well as prepare for any questions or concerns they might have. The key to this is a simple message.

Simple messages are sticky, memorable, and contagious (Gladwell, 2000), so the more confused parents are about the proposed changes, the stickier our messages need to be. We can neutralize misinformation with clear and simple messages that make the potential changes less daunting and more accessible. Teacher-talk won't cut it; parents need layman's terms and commonsense examples. Educators can easily forget how complex the language of education is. Faced with unfamiliar acronyms and terminology, parents can feel inept as

they attempt to navigate proposed changes. Commonsense examples—like the relationship between practice and games or how employees are typically given full credit for their growth within a company—often help establish a happy medium between talking above parents and talking down to them.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the myths of standards-based grading that can hijack meaningful conversations about grading reform. Rather than letting these myths fester, it is wise to address these issues head on to ensure they are kept in perspective. Each of the myths represents a real concern that needs attention; being mindful that the myths don't inadvertently become a reality is essential. The myths shouldn't stop discussions before they start, however, they can be used as a guideline for what teachers don't want their new grading practices to produce.

No one wants students unprepared for life after high school, nor does anyone want students to be irresponsible, though this can happen with a haphazard approach to implementing more modern grading practices as well. The intent of more sound grading practices is to create a culture of learning that yields accurate information about student proficiency; the myths put forth in this chapter do not represent the end goals of grading reform. Those who resist can use the myths as a way of keeping the grading reform effort in check. *If* the new practices and procedures begin to look as though the myths are coming to fruition, then a system of checks and balances is needed to stay on track.

Teachers are entitled to their perspectives, and no one should be surprised by the differences of opinion that are expressed during grading discussions; these opinions and perspectives cross an unnecessary line when, in advance of any productive conversations, the myths of standards-based grading are used to undercut productive conversations.

QUESTIONS FOR LEARNING TEAMS

1. What quote or passage represents your biggest takeaway from chapter 3? What immediate action will you take as a result of this takeaway? Explain both to your team.
2. Which of the five myths is the most serious hurdle your school or district will have to overcome?
3. Have you ever been involved in the implementation of a good idea that failed to take hold because of a poorly executed implementation plan? If so, what was it about the implementation plan that derailed its potential success?
4. How can we ensure that the implementation of new grading practices doesn't result in simply making school easier for students?

Continued →

5. Have you and your colleagues within the same subject, grade level, or department allowed for individual grading decisions while maintaining the consistency and accuracy of what you report?
6. How do you (or can you) strike the balance between preparing students for the future as adults and honoring where they currently are in their development toward adulthood?

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