

3 Peaks and 3 Pits of Standards-Based Grading

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Change involves the celebration of successes and the reflection on shortfalls. As my school has undertaken the task of transitioning from a traditional grading system to standards-based grading, we've learned a great deal along the way. We have observed a shift in the school culture from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008).

Under standards-based grading, our teachers have created an opportunity for students to persevere in the face of challenges. Students are measured on their proficiency of content standards. Some demonstrate early mastery and are able to move on to more difficult concepts, while others may require reteaching (<http://www.edimprovement.org/2012/06/when-and-how-to-reteach/>). Teachers are able to easily identify those students who may need some support in order to demonstrate proficiency. Students are beginning to understand and value the process of learning, rather than just earning a grade.

Although I've observed many great aspects of standards-based grading, I've also had many great discussions with other educators on how we can improve our implementation. I've detailed below three peaks (successes) and three pits (areas of improvement) that I've observed with our change to standards-based grading.

The 3 Peaks

Growth Mindset

Teachers are able to use ongoing formative assessments as a way to guide classroom instruction. Students are able to practice their mastery of standards without the penalty of receiving a poor grade in the gradebook. The process of reteaching creates an opportunity for both teachers and students to learn from their mistakes.

Teachers are able to reflect on instruction and evaluate if their lessons truly met the needs of their learners. Students are able to focus their efforts on concepts they struggled to understand and the option for reassessment. Together, reteaching and reassessment allow for all stakeholders to experience that intelligence can be developed and is not set in stone (Dweck, 2008).

Quality Curriculum and Assessments

Standards-based grading requires me to closely examine the actual standards of my content and evaluate the predetermined objectives. Without a clear set of measurable standards, there cannot be quality classroom instruction.

This year has been challenging, as departments have had to redesign instruction and assessments in order to create the opportunity for students to demonstrate proficiency. I've also been able to design assessments that allow for multiple methods of demonstrating mastery of content standards. Although this process has been a lot of work, I've never felt more involved in my curriculum.

Clear Communication

Standards-based grading allows me to clearly communicate with students and parents where individuals are with their understanding of each concept. No longer are students able to hide behind weighted averages and positive academic behaviors such as attendance.

Students should be motivated toward mastery of the material and not demotivated by trying hard and still getting a bad grade on an assessment, only to have to move right along to the next concept without gaining any insight. Standards-based grading allows me to clearly communicate with students about why they did poorly on the previous assessment, and to offer them a chance to work harder toward gaining mastery of the material and demonstrating their ability to achieve.

The 3 Pits

Teaching Responsibility

"I like the overall goal. But I don't want children to always think they can re-do things so they don't try their best the first time" (anonymous parent). I've had many parents communicate a similar concern to me throughout the school year so far. Although some are grateful for reteaching and reassessment, others are worried that we are not preparing their children for the "real world." I communicate to these parents that we are trying to encourage students to value persistence and appreciate effort in order to reach higher levels of achievement, which will benefit them into adulthood.

More Time?

All educators experience the need for more time in the school day, week, month, and year! Reteaching and reassessment opportunities have created additional work for classroom teachers. They are now grading assessments and subsequent reassessments which can take up a significant amount of time.

Many teachers utilize their regular classroom time for reteaching while allowing those students who demonstrated mastery to move on to more challenging concepts independently. Scheduling reassessments has been a challenge, as some teachers have digital assessments that require the computer lab. As more teachers convert to digital assessments and reassessments, the demand for technology has increased schoolwide.

Remaking the Wheel

Although I feel more connected to my curriculum, it's because I find myself redesigning many formative and summative assessments. Some of the activities or projects that I'd previously used in my classroom had been passed on to me by veteran teachers. Upon closer examination, these resources were very well designed but did not effectively offer the opportunity for students to demonstrate proficiency of content standards. I believe

that after this year, I will be able to reflect on and fine tune my new assessments without having to redesign entire curriculum units.

These are just a few examples of how standards-based grading has impacted my school culture. Please leave your ideas and comments below about how standards-based grading has been implemented at your school.

Research

Dweck, Carol S. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books trade pbk. ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008.

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