

## Tips for Adopting Standards-Based Grading

(Originally titled “Starting the Conversation About Grading”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, consultant/researcher Susan Brookhart strongly advises schools that are rethinking grading policies to start with the overarching issues before getting into the weeds. “Merely tweaking the details of a grading system can result in a system that makes even less sense than the one it was intended to replace,” she says. “Any school that is interested in reforming grading needs to talk about it in ways that challenge colleagues on the right questions... [and] deal seriously with educators’ long-standing beliefs and entrenched practices.” Brookhart lists four philosophical points that need to be discussed first:

- Grades should reflect students’ achievement of intended learning outcomes.
- Students and parents are the primary audience for grades; teachers, administrators, and other educators are secondary audiences.
- Grades should reflect each student’s individual achievement; group and cooperative skills should be reflected elsewhere, not in academic grades.
- Grades should support students’ motivation to learn; there should never be a point where students conclude that failure is inevitable and there’s no point in trying.

The biggest shift with standards-based grading is marking students on what they have *learned*. Many teachers are firmly rooted in a different belief – that grades are about what students have *earned* through the work they do, following directions, and behaving. Shifting this belief system is the first order of business, and Brookhart suggests these steps:

- *Transparency* – School and district leaders should be clear about their reasons for addressing grading practices.

- *Vote, compare, and discuss* – Working in small groups, faculty members should indicate their agreement or disagreement with the four points above and then begin the whole-group discussion with the areas of agreement. Where there’s disagreement, teachers should be asked “Why do you believe that?” and frame disagreement as “I’m not there yet.”

- *Debate* – Brookhart suggests randomly assigning teachers to pro and con positions, four or five on each side, and arguing for that position, whether they agree with it or not. Inevitably there will be teachers who say, “Why would students behave if I can’t grade them down if they don’t behave?” and that concern has to be addressed (for example, saying, “We need to develop alternatives for handling behavior.”)

- *A local expert panel* – Ask teachers who have experimented with standards-based grading to share how they got started, how they worked with students and parents, and what they learned.

- *Fishbowl* – Give a small group of teachers the discussion points above to debate, with the rest of the faculty observing.

Once a school has taken the plunge on standards-based grading, it can get into implementation questions: what grading scale to use (letters, percentages, or rubrics), how often

to report grades, whether to assign zeros for missed work, whether to adopt a “no D and F” policy, how many marks to combine, and how to combine them.

Brookhart says schools that make the shift to standards-based grading find themselves spending much more time discussing student learning – classroom strategies, differentiation, formative assessments, and coaching.

“Starting the Conversation About Grading” by Susan Brookhart in *Educational Leadership*, November 2011 (Vol. 69, #3, p. 10-14), <http://www.ascd.org>; Brookhart can be reached at [susanbrookhart@bresnan.net](mailto:susanbrookhart@bresnan.net).