



A Case for Standards-Based Grading and Reporting

An expanded-format report card shares progress on academic achievement and work habits beyond a numerical mark

BY KEN O'CONNOR/*School Administrator, January 2017*

When 10-year-old Elliot arrived home with his midyear report card, his parents glanced over his grades:

English	C
Mathematics	B
Social Studies	A
Science	C
Physical Education	A
Art	F
Music	D
World Language	B

The teachers' remarks were canned: a pleasure to teach; participates in class; gets along well with others; does not use class time wisely; did not hand in two assignments.

His parents' takeaway: Elliot is doing exceptionally well in physical education and English, fine in world language and math, average in science and not well at all in art and music. They would have to talk to him about what's going on at school, but it wouldn't be a very productive discussion because they have only general information about Elliot's performance in school.

In a second school district not far removed, Vivian's parents settled in to go over her report card. Unlike Elliot's card, Vivian's offered a comprehensive look at her performance with



Vivian O'Connor, granddaughter of article author Ken O'Connor, showing off her standards-based report card as a 1st grader at the Danforth Gardens Public School in Scarborough, just east of Toronto, in Canada. *(Photo courtesy of Ken O'Connor.)*

regard to her academic achievement in both skills and knowledge. In addition to traditional letter grades for some subjects, the report card included detailed comments about her strengths, areas for improvement, next steps in learning and letter grades for separate standards in English and math with no overall subject grade for those subjects. (Ideally, a school should do this for all subjects, not just English and math.)

Vivian's math teacher described her progress on each of the units and flagged areas needing improvement. "In our unit on data management," she wrote, "Vivian was able to work independently and with her partner to create 'yes/no' survey questions. ... Next term we will continue to work on her ability to clearly and completely explain her thinking when solving word problems."

Vivian's report card also showed grades for six learning skills and work habits: responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative and self-regulation. The teachers graded these skills on a four-level scale: Excellent, Good, Satisfactory and Needs Improvement.

Vivian received an N in self-regulation, which didn't surprise her parents. Combining the two parts of the report card gave them a rich picture of her standing: Her academic achievement is excellent (all A's), but her learning skills and work habits, especially self-regulation, requires improvement.

A Complete Picture

I call the latter report cards "expanded format standards-based" because they provide grades for standards in place of or in addition to grades for subjects and include a section on behavior. Common at the elementary school level in the U.S. and Canada, they are increasingly evident at the middle school level. High schools in some states, especially New Hampshire and Maine, where proficiency/competency-based education has been mandated, have begun to include grades for standards and provide separate grades for behavior on report cards.

When standards-based report cards incorporate traditional letter grades, the way the grades are determined is far from traditional. The grades reflect only the student's achievement of the learning goals, not his or her behavior.

Also, meanings of the grades are described in detail, guiding teachers in their grading and providing parents with more detailed information about their child's achievement. For example: "Level 3 — The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with considerable effectiveness. This represents the (expected) standard for achievement. Parents of students achieving at Level 3 can be confident that their children will be prepared for work in subsequent grades or courses. Letter Grade: B." This differs from traditional letter grades that have been linked only to a percentage range and described with one or two words such as "B: 80–89% Good" or "C: 70–79% Average."

Furthermore, teachers are required to gather evidence of student learning over time from observations, conversations and student products (not just tests) and to determine grades by considering the most consistent level of achievement with emphasis on the more recent evidence, which reflects the student's learning journey.

Teachers who implement standards-based grading and reporting consistently say it contributes to a learning culture, in place of the traditional grading/point accumulation culture, and that students become self-directed learners who have a much more positive attitude about school and learning. In a few schools and districts, there has been pushback by some teachers and parents, but this usually happens when administrators have not spent enough time clearly communicating the rationale and the benefits of standards-based grading and reporting.

Quality Grading

When reflecting on their school district's grading practices, administrators should ask, "Are the grades that students receive in our schools and district accurate, consistent, meaningful and supportive of learning?" This question must be asked to meet four conditions for effective grading:

1. Grades must be accurate because they support important decisions based on grades. If the grades are not accurate and the decisions are flawed, the course of a student's future can be sidetracked.
2. Grades must be consistent. It shouldn't matter whether a student is in Teacher X's class



Consultant Ken O'Connor sees standards-based report cards leading to quality student assessment and more effective grading practices.

or Teacher Y's class. The same level of achievement should earn the same grade.

3. Grades must be meaningful, and they are meaningful only when they are based on and provide information about achievement of the learning goals.

4. The process that leads to the determination of grades should support learning, not just the accumulation of points.

Traditional grading systems don't meet these conditions. Grades that mix achievement and behavior do not accurately reflect student mastery of learning goals. For example, grades may include penalties for late work and tardiness or extra credit for activities that have no connection to the learning goals. They may include group scores for cooperative learning projects that certainly don't reflect individual achievement.

Because teachers receive minimal guidance in state, district and school-grading procedures, especially regarding performance standards, traditional grading systems usually are not consistent. As a result, grading becomes a highly individual, idiosyncratic practice whereby two students achieving at the same level might receive very different grades.

Traditional grades are based on assessment methods and activities rather than on learning goals. Consequently, students can make up for weaknesses in one area with strengths in another. A student may be far from proficient in data analysis but strong in reaching other math learning goals and still get a B or even an A. What's more, a single grade for a subject does nothing more than provide a general impression of the student's performance.

Traditional grades do not support learning when their determination considers points for everything students do, giving rise to the "does this count?" syndrome. In addition, traditional grades use averages that are skewed by outlier scores as well as equally weighing scores for assessments at the beginning and end of the learning sequence.

The Way Ahead

If the school district's mission is to achieve excellence by educating and empowering all students to succeed and to develop students as responsible self-directed learners, adopting standards-based grading and reporting is the way to go.

Standards-based grading and reporting focuses on the learning goals in these advantageous ways:

»Has clear performance standards based on levels of proficiency, not points and percentages.

»Eliminates behavior, penalties, extra credit, attendance and group scores from grades.

»Recognizes that mistakes and misconceptions are a natural part of the learning process and students will not be penalized for those that occur early in the learning process. Grades are based on assessments *of* learning with assessments *for* learning providing descriptive feedback, not scores.

»Recognizes that effective learning and teaching processes result in students knowing more and performing better *now* than they did *then*. Grades are determined by the most consistent level of achievement with emphasis on the more recent evidence rather than the average.

»Develops students as self-directed learners by involving them in the assessment process, in record-keeping and in communicating about their achievement. This can be done by involving students in the construction of rubrics, by having students track their progress and growth in digital portfolios, and by turning traditional parent/teacher conferences into student-involved conferences that can range from the student simply being present to fully student-led conferences.

Standards-based grading and reporting improves communication between teacher and parent and teacher and student when the subject grades are eliminated — as they should be at least to grade 8 and preferably to grade 10.

Because teachers are required to follow guidelines for grading and reporting that focus on shared practices rather than individual, idiosyncratic practices, the standards-based grading process promotes greater consistency. It also recognizes that fairness is equity of opportunity, not uniformity.

Finally, standards-based grading and reporting honors teachers as professionals. Grading is no longer a mechanical, numerical exercise. Rather, it becomes an exercise in professional judgment. It also develops students' motivation, understanding and skill to be self-directed, lifelong learners.

Ken O'Connor is president of Assess for Success Consulting, based in Toronto, Ontario. E-mail: kenoc@aol.com. Twitter: [@kenoc7](https://twitter.com/kenoc7)

1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

703.528.0700
info@aasa.org

© AASA, The School Superintendents Association | 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 | Phone:
703-528-0700 | info@aasa.org