

Turning Spring Assessments Into Actionable Literacy Insights



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Spring assessments have arrived, and this Spotlight urges schools to move beyond spreadsheets and turn literacy data into meaningful action. These articles show how personalized nudges can **sharpen teachers' data use**; why grades should reflect learning, not just ranking students; and how a strengths-based approach can refocus conversations on growth. They emphasize **integrating formative assessment** with daily instruction, choosing interim tests wisely, **avoiding common leadership missteps**, and helping students track their own progress. **Aligned, instructionally focused assessments** can transform spring scores into **smarter literacy decisions**.



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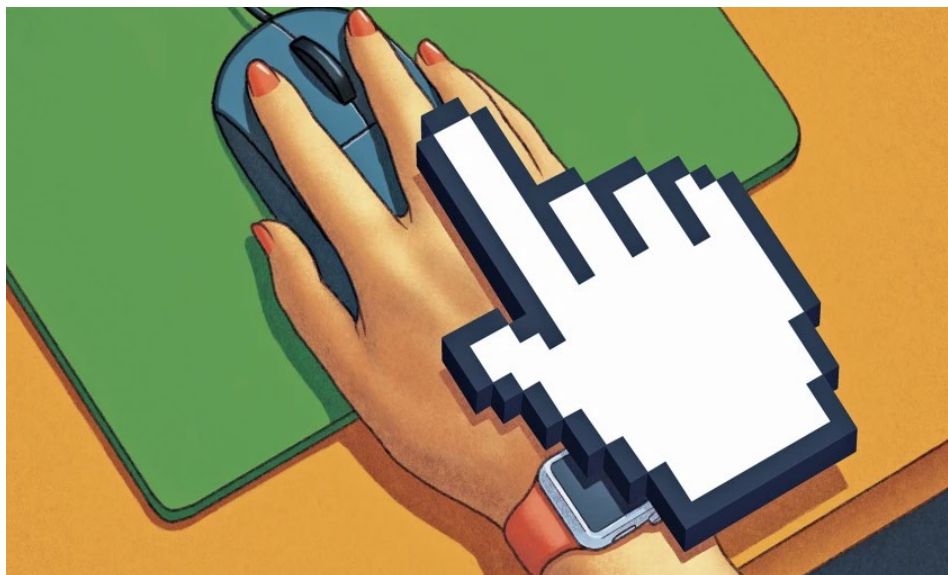
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Chris Whetzel for Education Week

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A Personal ‘Nudge’ Can Get Teachers To Use Student Data in Smart Ways

By Sarah D. Sparks

You can lead teachers to a technology tool, but can you make them use it?

Nudging teachers into the habit of exploring their students’ data may help teachers and students get more out of learning platforms, according to a massive study published this spring in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

While districts invested heavily in technology and online learning platforms during the past five years, past studies find educators have not been as quick to adopt the new tools.

“Typically, what we hear with any new introduction of technology in the school system is that teachers are overwhelmed. They have a lot of responsibilities, a lot of kids, a lot of things they’re supposed to be doing and implementing,” said Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which studies teachers’ technology use but was not involved in the current study. “They have limited time for planning time—being able to take a breath and really dig into these data tools.”

Researchers at the Character Lab at the University of Pennsylvania simultaneously tested 15 different messages, or nudges, designed to improve teacher engagement on the nonprofit online math learning platform

Zearn. The platform provides math practice to students and allows teachers to analyze their progress across different concepts.

A previous evaluation of Zearn found Nebraska students who used the program regularly improved faster in math—but students whose teachers more actively used the platform benefited more. That’s why researchers were invited to test the engagement messages on the math platform.

“Talking to people in ed tech, what I’m often told is that the final mile—which is getting people to actually use the tools that they’ve spent millions of philanthropic dollars creating—is often the longest mile,” said Angela Duckworth, the lead investigator of the study and co-founder of the Character Lab, which studies low-cost interventions for behavior changes.

“So much of human behavior is habit, ... and I think that’s true for teachers, too,” Duckworth said. “If you’ve got a certain routine and you teach your classes in a certain way, and now people are saying, ‘Oh, you should really capitalize on artificial intelligence,’ or ‘You should use this personalized learning platform,’ it’s a challenge.”

More than 140,000 elementary school teachers nationwide, whose nearly 3 million students used Zearn, randomly received four weekly emails in one of 15 different formats, encouraging them to use the math platform’s tools to analyze their students’ performance data. The messages included celebrity endorsements from author

Judy Blume or astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, prize giveaways, math teaching tips, and analyses comparing their students’ performance to that of other Zearn students in the same grade.

Overall, teachers only opened about a quarter of the emails, and there was no significant difference in open rate for any type of message. Researchers found that the students of teachers who received nudges completed about 2% more math units during the four-week study period, compared with students whose teachers only received a general message from Zearn.

The most effective nudges were personalized; for example, “tower alerts” notified teachers when their students got stuck on a particular line of problems, and progress messages updated teachers on how many lessons students completed and how much time they spent working on problems.

Teachers who received more personalized messages about their students’ progress logged into the system more often and had students who progressed 5% faster in math that week. The benefits to student math growth persisted at least two months after the messages.

“Teachers really care about their students, the children they have grown to love in their classroom,” Duckworth said. “If you send them an email in their very busy day and say, ‘I have something to tell you about your students,’ that’s more effective than telling that teacher, ‘If you read this email, you’ll learn something about students in general.’”

Like most interventions intended to “nudge” behavior, even the most effective emails had only small benefits, but Duckworth suggested free emails may help school leaders build habits for teachers learning new technology.

Administrators should watch the tone of their communications, though. In a prior study of nudges, Duckworth found “any kind of nudge has to be in the same tone as you are expecting. Like, you do not expect your pharmacy to be sending you knock-knock jokes in a reminder to get your flu shot.”

But CRPE’s Lake cautioned that schools should help teachers adopt technology tools and platforms as part of a “broader schoolwide strategy with professional development.”

CRPE has found teachers are less likely to regularly use technology interventions if they are simply provided as part of a toolbox, rather than integrated with broader school and district goals.

“The lack of integration and coherence in tech tools and these new AI tools is just a real problem,” Lake said, prompting teacher confusion over “which of these tools am I supposed to be using? What am I supposed to do about the data when I see it? It’s a bit of a mess right now.” ■

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What Are Grades Really For? What Research Says About 4 Common Answers

Grades can't be all things to all people, researchers caution

By Evie Blad

When Laura Link works with districts to review their grading policies, she starts by asking a simple question: What are grades for?

Are grades meant to motivate students? To help teachers determine who needs more support? To inform parents of their children's progress?

Link, an associate professor of education at the University of North Dakota, studies how K-12 schools formulate grades and how those decisions affect student learning. She also consults with school systems about their practices, starting with surveys and focus groups with families, caregivers, teachers, students, and administrators.

Those findings often expose misalignments in expectations about what grades and homework are supposed to accomplish.

Those differing priorities—and the tensions between them—cut to the heart of the grading debate. Grades can't be all things to all people, assessment experts say. Districts must weigh tradeoffs and communicate clearly when revising grading policies.

Grades “can affect students’ trajectories—not just academic trajectories but life trajectories,” Link said. “We use that symbol to make day-to-day decisions, as teachers and as families, that affect students’ futures.”

Here's what research says about four commonly cited uses of grades.

1. Gauging students' mastery of concepts

Do grades accurately measure students' mastery of academic concepts? Or do they measure their cumulative effort over time?

Survey results from one medium-sized Midwestern district revealed families are far more likely to believe grades reflect mastery than teachers and administrators.

“This may reflect an apparent mismatch between what parents/families believe grades represent and what teachers and



Robert Neubecker for Education Week

school principals know about how grades are determined,” Link writes in a study in the March edition of the journal *Improving Schools*.

That's why Link recommends districts create and share a clear statement about the purpose of grades—to get everyone on the same page. For example, the Bethlehem, Pa., district posts a statement on its website and on report cards themselves, explaining that grades “communicate with students and parents/guardians about students’ achievement towards specific goals.”

2. Motivating students to develop good habits

Families in Link's study also place more emphasis on grades reflecting personal responsibility compared to principals in the same district.

Under common A-F grading systems, teachers factor both academic achievement and noncognitive factors, such as extra credit opportunities or late-work penalties.

Advocates for standards-based grading say academic grades should focus exclusively on students' mastery of academic content, even if they have to redo assignments to prove it.

Critics of those approaches say traditional, cumulative grades motivate students to build study skills and discipline and reflect the realities they will face in college and careers.

Bethlehem schools piloted a “dashboard” approach: One part of the academic report

card measures students' academic progress used to tabulate GPAs, while a separate scoring rubric measures factors related to responsibility and engagement.

In the first year of that pilot in 2022, academic grade distributions were largely similar to the previous year's under a traditional grading system, Link said. But the two-part report card gave families a more nuanced view of their students' progress.

3. Communicating student progress with families

As districts increasingly stress the importance of engaging parents and caregivers in their children's learning, grades are meant to serve as a clear, consistent way to communicate academic progress.

But families must understand what grades represent and how they are calculated, grading experts say. Districts should clearly communicate any changes in grading policies, giving families time to digest the changes.

Parents use grades to determine what supports their children need, whether to enroll them in optional tutoring and out-of-school programs, and how to prepare them for possible future career paths.

Yet, researchers have grown concerned that grade inflation is sending the wrong message, especially in the wake of disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a November 2023 analysis by Learning Heroes, EdNavigator, and TNTIP, researchers dissected data from two school districts from the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years to explore how students' grades differed before and after the pandemic.

Four times as many students were chronically absent and tested below grade level after the pandemic. Of those students, 40 percent still got a B average or better in core subjects in 2021-22—nearly double the proportion of similarly situated students who got high grades in 2018-19.

A 2023 survey of 2,000 public school parents, conducted by Gallup on behalf of Learning Heroes, found that 79 percent of respondents said they believed their children were

getting B grades or better, 88 percent said their child was performing at or above grade level in reading, and 89 percent said their child was at or above grade level in math. That contrasted sharply with student-test scores, which showed only about half of students scored at grade level in those subjects.

“Access to different measures of achievement can provide additional nuance for parents who want to know how their child is doing and when to step in,” the authors wrote.

To highlight the disconnect, Learning Heroes posted billboards in six major cities—Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York City, Sacramento County in California, and Washington, D.C.—with displays of side-by-side data showing the percentage of students proficient in math or English in that city and the percentage of parents who think their child is at or above grade level in that subject.

4. Measuring college readiness

For high school students, college ambitions can serve as a key motivator for earning good grades—and keeping grade point averages as high as possible.

For parents, changes to grading policies can spark anxiety about how their children will perform under new metrics and how resulting marks will affect their ability to secure merit-based financial aid and admissions to competitive schools.

And GPAs hold greater weight for many students as a growing number of colleges and universities make admissions tests, like the SAT and ACT, optional.

While standardized tests are typically viewed as a more objective and consistent measure of achievement, a 2020 study found that students’ high school GPAs were more predictive of college completion than their ACT scores.

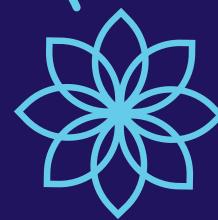
Researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research studied data from 55,084 Chicago public school students who immediately enrolled in a four-year college after graduating from 2006 to 2009.

Across varying types of high schools, students with GPAs under 1.5 had around a 20 percent chance of graduating from college within six years and students with GPAs of 3.75 or higher had around an 80 percent chance. By contrast, the likelihood that students with the same 11th grade ACT score would graduate from college varied more significantly depending on what high school they attended, researchers found. More recent studies have found similar patterns.

High school grades are shaped by many factors, including study skills and teachers’ varying approaches to assessment, the researchers wrote. But navigating that system may help students prepare for similar inconsistencies in college, they speculated.

“The fact that [high school grades] are based on a large number of raters (teachers) across a wide range of relevant tasks could actually make them very reliable as indicators of academic readiness for college, where students will also be asked to do a range of tasks with different expectations assessed by many different instructors,” the study said. ■

Data Don't Lie: Differentiation Matters for Intervention and Enrichment



In 2022, a literacy emergency was in full effect at Jacksonville Lighthouse Elementary School.

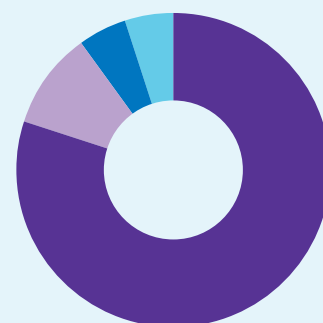
At this K-4 public charter school in Arkansas, the population of 210 students is approximately 80% African American, 10% White, 5% Hispanic, and 5% of mixed heritage. After several years of dropping scores, only 10% of students were reading at grade level, and the school was rated "F."*

"We were failing at every grade level, and failing our kids," Principal John Osborn said.

Administrators understood literacy was the No. 1 need—and they didn't have the luxury of time to find a solution.

**data provided by Jacksonville Lighthouse Elementary School principal*

Student Demographics*



- 80% African American
- 10% White
- 5% Hispanic
- 5% Mixed Heritage



A Quick Decision With Teacher Buy-In

With literacy as their most critical need, the Jacksonville Lighthouse administrators acted quickly to get a literacy specialist on site, partner with a local agency for academic support, and choose a core, state-approved curriculum. Then, they started looking at supplements.



"It was the teachers who said, 'We need to go with Lexia®,'" Osborn said.

One teacher in particular had used Lexia at other schools and had seen it work well—and she convinced everyone Lexia® Core5® Reading was the way to go. She would go on to become the primary champion for Core5 on staff, learning the product inside and out and assisting with trainings, resources, and presentations.

The decision was made to adopt Core5, along with the theme of "PLAY: Prioritize Literacy and Achieve it Year-Round."

Implementation With Rapid Results

During the first year of implementation, Osborn said administrators made Core5 available to teachers—but didn't provide enough training or support. During the following year, they revamped the training and recruited their Core5 champion teacher to be the official on-staff Lexia point person. That's when they started seeing results.

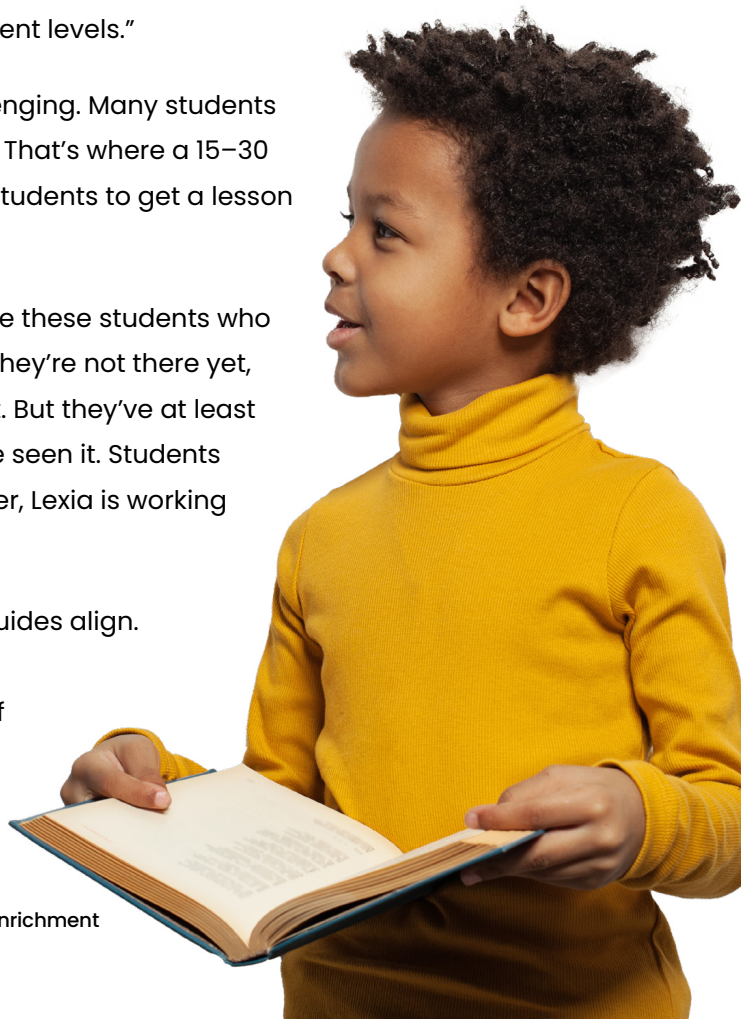
Reading proficiency skyrocketed.

"We have about two hours a day for core reading instruction," Osborn said. "Teachers spend about an hour to an hour and a half on grade-level teaching, doing lessons, small-group activities, and core content. But if you're teaching to 25 kids, you have about five different levels."

Teaching to these five levels in a single group lesson can be challenging. Many students are going to get it, some will still miss it, and some already know it. That's where a 15–30 minute period of intervention and enrichment comes in, allowing students to get a lesson at their level.

"Lexia Core5 is differentiated by student," Osborn said "So, you have these students who are way behind, but they can still practice that skill on Core5, or if they're not there yet, it starts them where they need to be, and it works their way up to it. But they've at least got the grade-level exposure with the whole-group lesson. They've seen it. Students who are reading fluently at a fourth grade level as a second-grader, Lexia is working with them at their level, pushing them to learn even more skills."

Lexia also supports core curriculum instruction when the pacing guides align. Alongside his champion educator, Osborn told his teachers, "If Lexia is doing what we're doing, pull a Lexia Lesson®. If it matches, if a large chunk of students are working on that skill in Lexia, we can overlap some of those lessons."



Data You Don't See Every Day

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In just two years, Jacksonville Lighthouse Elementary School went from 10% of students reading at grade level (above the 60th percentile) in 2022-23 to 30% in winter 2024-25, based on NWEA testing results.*

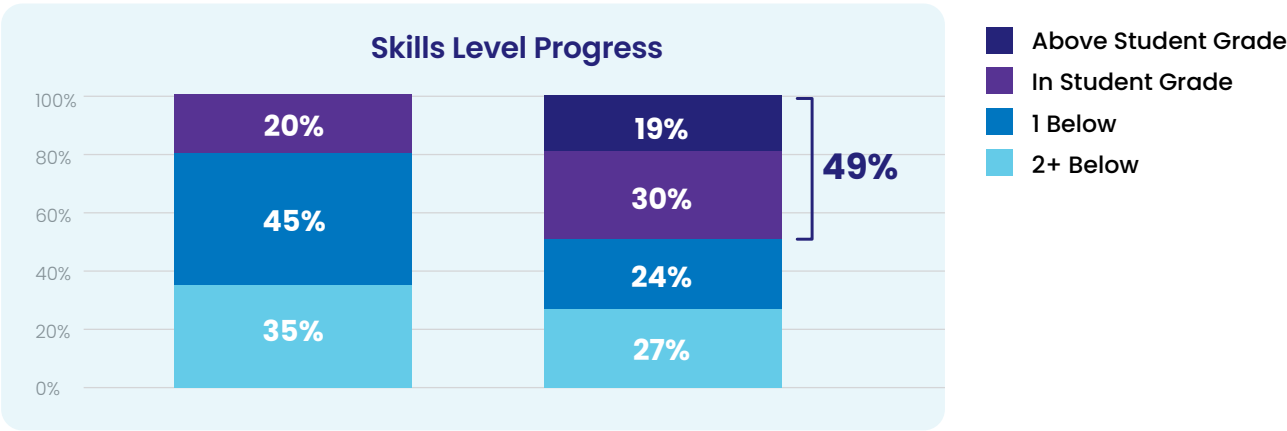
Educators at the charter district set a stunning goal: They want 70% of students to be on grade level in 2025.

"It's a lofty goal," Osborn said. "We're going chunk by chunk." The goal he set based on K-2 NWEA test results in 2022 was around getting from 10% to 45% of students on grade level. Last year, 30% of K-2 students achieved grade-level reading skills. Now, as of midyear, the school is trending at 40%-45% of K-2 students on grade level—very close to achieving Osborn's initial goal.*

Osborn is most proud of his kindergarten students. Eighty-four percent of kindergarten students* are scoring above the 40th percentile. In prior years, he shared, that number used to only be 40% above. "That really low-low category? We're seeing it decrease every single year now," Osborn said.

Looking ahead to the goal of 70%, Osborn and other charter school leaders agree the expectation needs to be high. Even if they fall short, they'll still move the needle, and Osborn sees that needle moving, especially for students who were at the bottom.

"First, we started with culture, then the team, then systems," he said. "There's no single solution. It's a daily push where everything matters. Intervention, enrichment, amazing lessons. Alignment with the science of reading, standards, skills. I don't think people realize how important the supplemental piece is."



In Core5, students at Jacksonville Lighthouse Elementary School went from only 20% reading at or above grade level to 49% in a single year. When they used the program with fidelity, **82%** of students ended the year working on grade level or higher skills.**

*data provided by Arkansas Jacksonville Lighthouse Charter Elementary School principal

**data from 2023-2024 school report from Lexia Analytics hub

A Lot To Celebrate—and Continued Growth for the Future

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At Jacksonville Lighthouse Elementary School, students are excited about leveling up and confidence is high. They celebrate with cupcakes and cheers because Core5 fills the gaps for students who are behind—and lets more advanced students work ahead.

Teachers feel the progress and they're excited to see positive changes. Although they've made changes to their curriculum, the teachers insist on keeping Core5 in place. They're also staying put in their roles in a way they didn't in the past: The school's retention rate is higher than it's ever been at around 90–95%*.

Osborn attributes this to the fact they're seeing success. Reading scores are going up, platforms are in place, and the teachers want and deserve to enjoy this success. There's a sense that they're finally on the right track and need to stay the course to see exponential benefits roll in.

While the new state-awarded letter grade for the school hasn't been released, Osborn is hopeful his school will be upgraded because students are showing growth in every discipline: Math, ELA, science—every tested category shows improvement*. The state no longer categorizes this school as in need of monitoring.

"We've built this program and there's nothing major that we need to change," Osborn said. "Lexia perfectly fits into a collaborative learning model. When you talk about wanting to differentiate and enrich for students in literacy, Lexia fits perfectly."

“

The most important thing Core5 does is it ensures your students are learning at their level. Above or below grade, it's giving them the skills that they need to keep growing and keep improving. It's very specific. It's very individualized. The data reports are incredibly easy, and it gives that feeling of success and a win to teachers. And the students will get excited about it, enthusiastic about it too.”

– John Osborn, Principal, Jacksonville Lighthouse Charter Elementary School

Why Lexia? Lexia Checks the Four PLC Questions

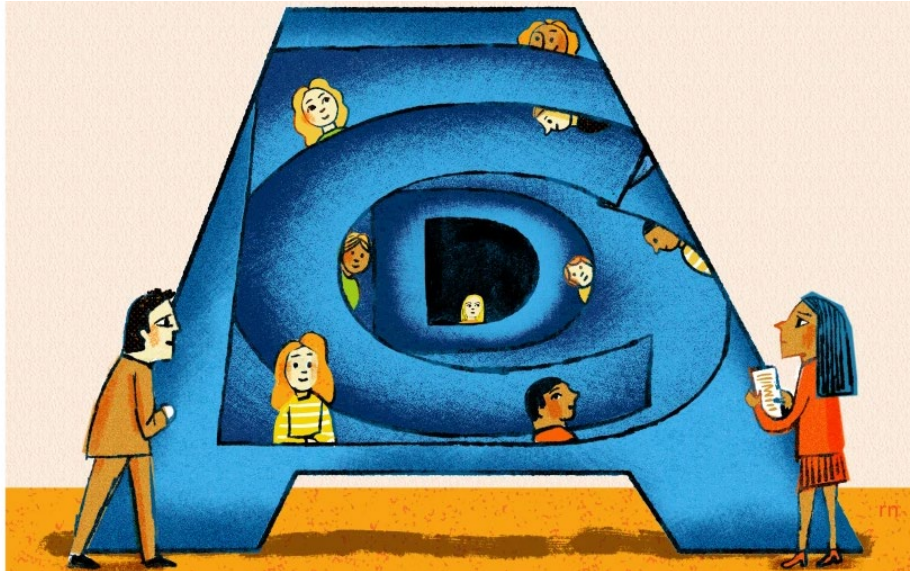
- ☒ What do students need to learn?
- ☒ What do you do if they haven't learned it?
- ☒ How do you know they've learned it?
- ☒ What do you do if they have learned it?

**student and teacher data provided by Arkansas Jacksonville Lighthouse Charter Elementary School principal*

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Data Don't Lie: Differentiation Matters for Intervention and Enrichment
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Robert Neubecker for Education Week

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A Strengths-Based Guide to Assessing Student Progress (DOWNLOADABLE)

By Evie Blad & Francis Sheehan

Teachers use rubrics to ensure consistency and clarity in grading student assignments by carefully detailing what a successful project looks like.

But the seeming simplicity of these assessment tools masks complicated questions about how to measure student progress and how to encourage continued learning, said Kevin Perks, the senior director of Quality Schools and Districts at WestEd, a nonpartisan education research organization.

“You have to determine what constructs to measure; how to measure those accurately, with validity; and then how to develop instruments that can be used consistently,” he said. “Assessment literacy is one of the largest knowledge gaps teachers have. It’s an area where they aren’t really trained.”

When designed effectively, rubrics can clarify expectations, minimize subjectivity, and standardize grading criteria across multiple teachers, said Perks, who leads training sessions for teachers about classroom assessment.

There are many schools of thought about how to properly design these grading tools. In this downloadable guide, explore Perks’ suggestions for a simplified, strengths-based rubric centered on a specific learning standard. ■

Does Your Rubric Make the Grade?

Rethink How You Assess Student Work

When designed effectively, grading rubrics can clarify expectations, minimize subjectivity, and standardize grading criteria across multiple teachers, said Kevin Perks, the senior director of Quality Schools and Districts at WestEd, a nonpartisan education research organization. But traditional rubrics can be confusing and unnecessarily complicated, he said.

Here are Perks' suggestions for a simplified, strengths-based rubric centered on a specific learning standard.

1. Don't add extra language to the learning standard / A typical rubric is a grid with rows of learning expectations on the left side and columns across the top outlining multiple levels of success—such as poor, fair, good, excellent. Teachers fill in each cell on that grid with a description of performance for each expectation at each level. While the aim is clarity, the result can be confusion, Perks said.

"Teachers try to figure out the gradation of language to define each level, and they end up creating new language," he said. "The minute you start adding new language, you are unintentionally adulterating the standard you are trying to teach."

2. Replace terms like "meets expectations" with numbered levels of success / Instead of that traditional grid, Perks recommends a checklist-based scoring guide that breaks down the concepts within a learning standard. Teachers check off demonstrated skills and provide written feedback on how students can improve. Instead of vague labels, number performance levels 1-4, with an index defining each level.

"It's easier for kids to comprehend and it's all really oriented around proficiency," Perks said.

3. Consider co-creating your scoring guide with students / Inviting students to unpack a learning standard at the beginning of a unit can jump-start the learning process and help them understand expectations for assignments, Perks said. Teachers should collaborate with students to identify and define all the concepts within a learning standard and discuss how they might demonstrate those concepts in an assignment. That conversation can shape the rubric or help students understand an existing one.

4. Use examples of strong work / Including examples of successful work alongside scoring criteria can help ensure that different graders apply the same scoring criteria more consistently. For example, the SAT provides "anchors" or example essays for the reviewers to demonstrate various score levels. Similarly, showing students successful examples of past work can also give them a clearer understanding of the concepts they are learning and how to demonstrate mastery, Perks said. Students may even benefit from reviewing an example that doesn't meet expectations and identifying ways it could be improved.

The Old Way: A Traditional Rubric

	Failing	Basic	Proficient	Exceptional
Concept 1				
Concept 2				
Concept 3				

*Description in each box defines performance for each concept at each level

Try This! A Strengths-Based Rubric

Standard 0.0

☐ Concept 1

☐ Concept 2

☐ Concept 3

☐ Concept 4

☐ Concept 5

☐ Concept 6

Teacher provides feedback on how student can advance learning. For students at level 4, attach the standard for the next grade level.

Scoring index:

Level 1- The student work meets some but not all the criteria (less than half of boxes checked).

Level 2- The student work meets most but not all the criteria (more than half of boxes checked).

Level 3- The student work demonstrates all the knowledge and skills required by the standard.

Level 4- In addition to meeting all criteria, the student's work exceeds expectations by demonstrating proficiency in the next grade band and/or by making thoughtful and substantive connections to knowledge and skills in other standards or disciplines.

Published April 17, 2024

What Teachers Should Know About Integrating Formative Assessment With Instruction

By Sarah D. Sparks

Philadelphia—

Teachers need more support to move testing from a “necessary evil” to a classroom tool, experts say.

While summative assessments—like unit quizzes or annual state tests—are used for evaluation and accountability, research shows formative assessments—like puzzles, projects, and class error analyses—can help teachers and students identify misunderstandings and reflect on students’ progress as they’re learning.

While most teachers use at least some formative measures in daily classroom practice, experts at the American Educational Research Association conference here last week argued they need more support to integrate daily assessment practices with overall classroom instruction.

“We need to think about assessment more holistically,” said E. Caroline Wylie, a senior associate at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment and co-author of the National Academy of Education’s new report on assessment released last week. “Certainly we’ve got to be sharing learning goals for students, assessment, and learning in ways that are recognizable.”

For example, in one study, Dustin Van Orman, a STEM education research associate at Western Washington University, asked a national sample of more than 100 elementary student-teachers who participated in simulations of English, science, and math classes. The teachers were asked how much experience they had in using formative assessment, and then were asked to use information about students in the simulated classes to plan tasks and other formative assessments over three class periods.

About 1 in 5 of the preservice teachers had little to no prior training in formative assessment, and a third had experience only with formal testing, rather than informal measures through tasks and activities. One preservice teacher reported that her mentor-teacher downplayed the usefulness of classroom assessment and “only likes to do assessment if it’s like something she kind of has to do.”

While a majority of preservice teachers in the study could identify tasks students should



E+/Getty

be able to do as they learn particular academic content, Van Orman and his colleagues found many student-teachers did not set learning goals with their students or set criteria for tests and tasks based on learning goals. Rather, tests and tasks often could be disconnected from overarching instructional goals. Teachers less experienced in assessment also tended to give more static feedback—praising or correcting students—but not providing information on which students were expected to act.

How to use formative assessments effectively

“Assessment shouldn’t be dropped in from the sky, disconnected from student experience,” said Wylie, who was not part of the preservice teacher study. It’s also important for teachers to understand their own and students’ cultural backgrounds when designing assessments, she noted.

Van Orman and Erin Riley-Lepo, a visiting assistant professor at the College of New Jersey, have been working with researchers, teachers, and principals to develop a framework for teachers’ own assessment literacy.

To effectively use formative assessment in class, they recommended:

- Teachers and students develop a shared understanding of learning goals.

- Assessments focus on what students are learning in ways that the students can recognize, so that they can understand their own progress.
- Students should engage in self- and peer-assessments, to help take ownership of their learning.
- Assessments should make students’ thinking visible to both the teacher and students, to correct misconceptions and build on students’ strengths.
- Assessments should directly inform teachers’ instruction.

Building better classroom assessment practice also requires support from principals and district leaders.

“We talk about teachers, but the reality is, teachers are embedded in schools and districts with particular approaches and constraints on their assessment that may or may not be—and often is not—supportive of active and focused assessments,” Wylie said.

For example, Wylie noted that in the last four months, she and her research team repeatedly had to cancel professional development for teachers because the principals could not secure enough substitute teachers to cover their classes. ■



Seng kui Lim/Getty

Published November 06, 2023

This Teacher Has Students Track Their Own Progress in Class, and It's Paying Off

By Lauraine Langreo

When Virginia's Prince William County school district switched to standards-based grading nearly a decade ago, middle school social studies teacher Erin Merrill wanted an easier way to keep track of her students' mastery of the specific standards tested on the year-end state standardized assessment.

Merrill also wanted to empower her students to take ownership of their learning. Her solution: giving students a data notebook to track their progress.

Standards-based grading is the practice of aligning graded tasks with clearly stated learning targets drawn from the state standards. Students still earn a score of 0 to 100 on graded assignments, but teachers' gradebooks must list which standards are being assessed with each assignment. Students also have multiple attempts to master the standards, with grades on assignments that demonstrate higher mastery replacing earlier grades.

The data notebook Merrill uses with her students is a four-page tracker that has the 14 civics and economics standards that 8th grade students in Virginia are expected to learn by the end of the year. For example, students

should be able to demonstrate knowledge of the foundations of American constitutional government by identifying the purposes for the U.S. Constitution stated in its preamble, and identifying the procedures for amending the document.

With the tracker, students have different ways to visualize their progress. One way is by noting next to each standard whether they failed, passed, or mastered it based on their grades on summative assessments on which each question is connected to a specific standard. Students can also visualize their progress by filling in their scores on charts.

"Not only are the students seeing the value of it and appreciating the use of it," Merrill said, "but I am seeing success in the actual test scores and I think that's a win-win for everybody."

In an interview with Education Week, Merrill discussed how she came up with the data notebook and how it's affected student performance. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

How are you assessing your students' mastery of different standards?

I try to do a balance of things in my classroom: My students get a lot of creative-based projects so that they can have more au-

thentic experiences. But there are always standards-based unit tests at the end. I use a variety of tools, but lately I've been using [online testing platform] Edulastic a lot because it has a test interface that's exactly like TestNav [the online testing platform Virginia uses for state standardized testing]. So I can have my students practice a lot of the things that they're going to be doing [during the standardized test].

I've also found it really helpful for my students to be successful at the end of the year if they know what they're going to be learning. It goes beyond just putting a target on the board, which is something that a lot of teachers are required to do, but we find a lot of students don't get a lot out of that. My students receive a data notebook that has all of their standards of learning that they're going to be required to learn, written in kid-friendly language. Then as we go through every unit assessment, the students will calculate their percentage of mastery for each strand and have a visual of what areas they need to retest on, because the idea of a good standards-based assessment is that you don't retest maybe all 30-40 questions of a unit test. If a student mastered five out of the six things that you're testing them on, they should only need to retest in one area, so we do that.

I have the data notebook to help give them a visual and make sure that they're keeping track. My students tell me they really like seeing what they have to learn, which isn't something they're given in a lot of classes, and they like having that visual of how they're doing, especially growing over the course of the year. I use that when we get ready for SOL [Standards of Learning assessment] review, so that I can target it individually to the students' needs, instead of having to again spend four, five, or six weeks recovering everything we did for the year.

What led you to create a data notebook for your students?

We started being trained on standards-based grading, I think, around 2017. That was really a trigger for me to rethink what I was asking the students to do and how I was grading it. My whole thing is that I should not have to keep track of 80 students' progress. I mean, I should know how they're doing, but the students themselves need to start taking accountability so that they have a say in their education. Being an 8th grade teacher, it's such a great age to start building their independence, so that when they get to those advanced high

school classes, and then possibly onto college, then they are able to self-advocate more, and they have experience looking at their own learning and seeing if they need to retest or what they need to study.

Have you seen a change in students' academic performance?

The first year that I tried this it was actually my professional goal, so it was something that I tracked throughout the year and wrote up for my report. I asked the students three times during the year: How prepared did they feel for the end-of-the-year standardized test if they had to take it tomorrow? What score range do they think they would earn? How well did they feel that they understood what they were supposed to be learning? How did they feel about the data notebooks themselves?

On a scale of 1 to 5, the average rating was a 4.3 on being prepared for the SOL. No one said that they felt like they were going to fail. Two-thirds of the students thought they were going to get a solid "pass" or an "advanced." The average rating for whether they understood what they needed to learn was a 4. And overwhelmingly the students said they love seeing how they've done using the data notebook. About 25 percent of the students added that they wished that other classes did this, too.

Since I have implemented the data notebooks, I have had a 100 percent pass rate on the SOL.

Do you have a student success story you'd like to share?

I had a student who struggled academically and had never passed a Standards of Learning test in Virginia and came to my class sort of, 'OK, I'm in a social studies class. That's whatever.' She wasn't particularly thrilled. She didn't hate the subject, but she was there. I guess she just sort of clicked with what I did. Her confidence soared. Her engagement in the class was higher because she knew, 'Here is proof that I am succeeding in what I'm learning. I am eager to try out more questions in class and take more risks to see if I understand it before the test.' She passed her first SOL with me. ■



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Picking an Interim Assessment? Do This First, Say School Leaders

By Sarah Schwartz

One of the many responsibilities that falls to school district leaders is whether to use an interim assessment—one that's given every couple of months—to measure student progress.

These tests can serve several different purposes, including predicting performance on state exams and identifying subsets of skills for which students might need support.

Picking the right tool is a high-stakes decision. Teachers may use the results of these tests to adjust their instruction or determine which students will receive interventions. But it can also be hard to identify exactly what test will best suit a district's specific purposes.

Last year, the nonprofit curriculum reviewer EdReports announced that it would start releasing reviews of interim assessments as well, judging their technical quality and usability. These kinds of outside evaluations are hard to come by right now, as they're often proprietary, created by private companies.

But earlier this year, the organization put the plan on hold indefinitely, because not enough assessment companies agreed to participate.

It was disappointing news for Christine Droba, the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning in North Palos School Dis-

trict 117 in Palos Hills, Ill.

"An external review would be huge," she said, removing some of the burden of assessing validity and reliability of these tests from teachers' and other educators' shoulders.

Droba and North Palos superintendent Jeannie Stachowiak spoke with Education Week about how their district chooses interim assessments, and what they did after discovering that the test they were using wasn't aligned with the year-end test in Illinois. This state test is used for federal accountability purposes.

They also shared their advice for other school leaders wondering about the alignment of interim assessments to their teaching.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How does your district use interim assessments?

Droba: We use our interim assessments as a tool to predict how students are going to do on the state assessment. It is something that we use to identify which students need enrichment, which students need additional support in terms of: Are they going to be ready for the end of year benchmark?

We look at, where's grade-level proficiency? How close is it to our target? How many students are below that level? What do they

need to do to get to the end of the year benchmark? Which students are going to start intervention? That's our fall assessment. By the winter, we track progress from fall to winter, and then revise any plans that we have—if we need to do more support in this area, or maybe less support in this area.

And then the spring testing session is really done to track growth from fall to spring, and we also use the spring assessment to continuously make sure that the interim assessment is aligned to the state assessment. We're always looking at: Are these numbers showing us the same thing?

How did you figure out that your interim assessments weren't aligned?

Stachowiak: [The assessment we were using] is not directly aligned to Illinois State Standards.

We had teachers, understandably, taking a look at some of the things on the [interim] assessment and beefing up their instruction in those areas. However, those were not areas that were target areas for assessment on a state assessment. So they were working very hard to make sure students met standards on an interim assessment that was really not aligned.

We started to look for other potential assessments that would be better aligned, which was when we made the switch [to a new interim test]. We have a data coordinator in the district who meets with our leadership team, constantly. And we are looking to do a data dive to make sure that [the new interim assessment] is a better predictor for our students.

Droba: We worked with our data coordinator to take the assessment from the spring and then the [state] assessment data for the same group of kids. And he ran a correlational study to figure out what was the correlation between the two data sets. I believe that number was around 0.7 or 0.8, which is very high. He was basically saying that these numbers are correlated.

That was similar to the research that [the interim assessment provider] already presented to us. Their correlations were a little bit higher than what he found with our data set. But it was still high enough that we were like, "Yeah, let's move forward, this is still good. It's in alignment."

What advice would you give to other districts that may be having similar questions?

Droba: I would say that you need to have clarity on your goals and priorities. First and fore-

most, we made it very, very clear that the state test is what's measuring the state standards. It's what our whole curriculum and system is built on.

[The interim assessment] is a tool to predict how kids are going to do on the state assessment. So we have very clear priorities. If you don't have that, it can be very confusing. Which assessment? What am I looking for? What's the purpose of the assessment? You really need to have clarity, first on the purpose of the assessment and how you want to use it.

Stachowiak: We value the state assessment, because we believe it measures what our teachers teach and what our students should learn. And then based on that value, we create goals for the school district. We share those goals with the Board of Education, obviously. We share those goals with the teachers, so that at all of our professional learning, community meetings, everything that we're doing with our staff, that's the goal in mind—to make sure that the students are going to achieve those goals that we expect.

If you don't have that goal in mind, and that alignment, it's really difficult to make sure that everyone is sharing and doing the same thing and valuing not only the state assessments, but then whatever interim assessments you're using to measure.

Is there information that you would want publicly available about interim assessments that you don't have access to?

Droba: An external review would be huge.

A lot of what we get is from the company itself. They're going to give us this report that says, "Yes, it's aligned to IAR. Yes, we do that." They do their own research. Having an external reviewer would help just make sure that their methods were valid, that everything meets the high-quality standards that you would expect.

We read through the reports that they provided to us, and then we piloted the program to make sure that in practice, it was what we wanted it to be. But having the external review would just provide a set of eyes that was not the company.

We work with teachers on our review committee, and they know the usability of it. But to have a research company explore the validity and reliability of an assessment, that just allows [teachers] to review that instead of having to actually do the review themselves. ■

OPINION

Published October 28, 2025

Principals Often Misuse Student Achievement Data. Here's How to Get It Right

8 recommendations for dodging common data sins

By David E. DeMatthews & Lebon
"Trey" D. James III

Each school year, one important task on a principal's plate is to review student-achievement data to identify trends and adjust goals. However, several common misinterpretations and misuse of such data from standardized assessments can have serious consequences for teachers, staff, and families. In our own experiences in administration and school leadership research, we have seen firsthand how novice and veteran principals fall short of leveraging the valuable data from state tests.

The reality is that many principals have been socialized to use data in problematic ways. Others might work for supervisors who are misinformed on effective data use.

Some common ways we have witnessed principals misuse data include permanently labeling particular students as "low performing" and tracking them into less rigorous or remedial courses focused solely on test preparation, penalizing teachers or students for test scores without any consideration of context or growth over time, pressuring teachers to teach to the test, sharing identifiable student data on publicly displayed data walls, and ignoring factors like students' language, disabilities, or home-life circumstances when prioritizing resources to raise student achievement.

In this biweekly column, principals and other authorities on school leadership—including researchers, education professors, district administrators, and assistant principals—offer timely and timeless advice for their peers.

These approaches to data use are harmful to school culture and teacher working conditions, and they do not support long-term sustainable improvements to student achievement. They can lead to misdiagnosing students in need of interventions or special education supports, which further un-



Vanessa Solis/Education Week via Canva

dermines student morale, causing increased stress, disengagement, and dropout.

Testing companies, research centers, and researchers have long clarified that standardized tests should not be used as a sole or primary measure of student achievement, teacher effectiveness, or school quality. These scores reflect only a snapshot, not deeper learning or critical-thinking skills a student or student body might possess through engaging with high-quality curriculum and instruction.

Perhaps, most important, standardized-test scores must be understood not only as important measures of student progress but also as imperfect. What is tested and how test results are interpreted are political decisions that have implications for funding decisions, school closures, teacher evaluations, and the broader stigmatization of schools serving historically marginalized communities.

Despite these challenges, principals can effectively utilize standardized-testing data to make meaningful improvements on their campus, especially if they are educated on the appropriate uses of data.

We offer a few recommendations and reminders to principals as they dig into their achievement data with their administrative and instructional partners:

- Use standardized-test scores alongside other forms of data collected during the year, including observations of teacher lessons and student work, classroom interventions, and assessment data, as well as attendance and behavioral data. We recommend reviewing the AASA's "Using Data to Improve Schools: What's Working" and the National Forum on Education Statistics' "Data Use for School and District Leaders" reports.
- Analyze data based on campus goals and student populations with teams that include diverse perspectives.
- Pinpoint strengths and areas of growth. For example, consider where students performed well and where they struggled.

- Identify students who might benefit from specific types of interventions, supports, and enrichment opportunities, including those with disabilities and English learners.
- Disaggregate data to identify and address potential disparities, particularly for students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, and students who are struggling academically.
- Plan targeted areas of professional development for all teachers, teacher teams, and individual teachers as appropriate. Both the Institute of Education Sciences and the National Association of Elementary School Principals have produced free, time-tested guides on using student-achievement data to support instructional decisionmaking.
- Determine where additional support staff is needed and adjust the master schedule to enable students to receive appropriate instruction and interventions aligned to multitiered systems of support. The CEEDAR Center's Assessment Practices Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports tool is one good resource.
- Develop a communication plan for sharing data with families and staff in ways that are clear, culturally responsive, and support student growth.

In our experiences, principals can create a data-informed culture that improves teaching and learning throughout the year by setting a clear vision for schoolwide data use and establishing regular data-review cycles with grade-level teams, special education personnel, and instructional coaches to analyze benchmark data and formative assessments.

Steady efforts to routinely identify students who are struggling and may benefit from Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions based on multiple forms of data can ensure that struggling learners receive targeted support. These efforts allow principals to make short-term adjustments to professional development and resource allocations that can lead to a better school year.

We hope that recommendations presented here, while not comprehensive, can offer a

good starting point for principals seeking to effectively leverage student-achievement data to improve their schools. ■

David E. DeMatthews is the W.K. Kellogg Endowed Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. Lebon “Trey” D. James III is an assistant professor and program coordinator for school leadership at Sam Houston State University. Both previously served as school administrators and teachers.

OPINION

Published May 13, 2025

Our Grading System Was Setting Students Up to Fail—Until This Change

The bumpy but transformative switch to standards-based grading

By Matthew Ebert

Several years ago, during a one-on-one conversation with an art teacher at the middle school where I was principal, I came to an unsettling realization.

We were wrestling with the fact that our traditional way of grading was doing our children a disservice. As the school leader, I had spoken with many alumni who told me just how different the expectations were in high school.

When I reflected on one graduate who had recently returned to visit, I realized that we had set her up to fail.

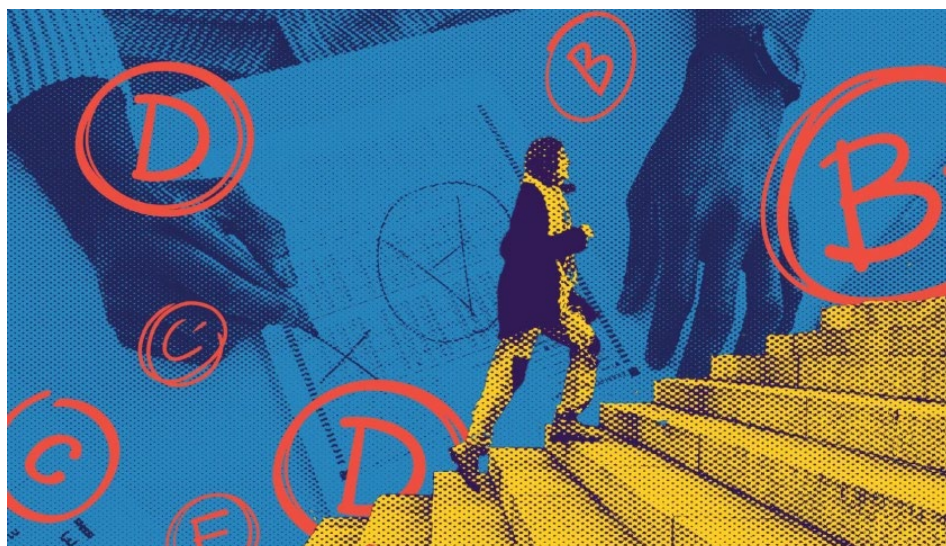
The recent graduate had been a wonderful student. She showed up every day, worked hard, and supported her peers. She was delightful. She was also behind academically.

She had come to us from an elementary school that was underperforming and could often feel chaotic. At home, she was living a life that more closely resembled adulthood than childhood, often minding younger children and taking care of a mom who needed help.

With support from her teachers, she was earning A's and B's on her report card. However, her grades were not an accurate reflection of her independent mastery of standards. Our A's and B's represented that she completed classwork, turned in her homework, and participated in class. None of that meant that she grasped the content and skills—but in our district, it did mean she was eligible for one of the “top” high schools.

When she graduated from our school, she attended one of those selective high schools only to transfer out in less than a year. When she came back to visit, she shared that the new environment was simply too much for her. Classes were bigger, and teachers had less capacity to individualize instruction.

Even though we wanted all our students to have access to the most prestigious schools, it wouldn't mean much if they couldn't be successful.



Vanessa Solis/Education Week via Canva

If we wanted to do a better job for students like her, then we had to adjust the way we graded—which would mean changing the way we instructed.

I set out to learn more about standards-based grading, an approach to learning that evaluates student learning against a specific set of standards. Students have multiple opportunities to retake assessments, with their final grade reflecting their mastery of a skill or standard rather than the average of various assignments. If you got a 50% on the fraction test, for example, you could take it again. If you got a 75% the next time, that was your new grade.

This approach meant that children's grades would reflect academic mastery and nothing else. Our team researched it, talked to staff, and discussed it with alumni.

Eventually, we shifted the school to standards-based grading. Our team tested things out, had honest debates, observed each other's classrooms, and argued. We figured out how this approach would work for special education. We talked about all the different ways assessments could look. We hashed out how many times a student could reassess. We

sat down with families and got their feedback.

When we stripped away the other pieces of traditional grading and solely focused on standard mastery, students' grades dropped precipitously.

I would love to say that we met this challenge head-on. That we took it as an opportunity to be great. But that's not true—not immediately.

For many of us, our initial response was despair. What were we doing here? What had we been doing?

I thought that standards-based grading would increase equity. Traditional school consistently rewards children whose families have more resources. However, there are always the kids who can handle the material but don't have the time and support to complete their homework each night. Now, that they wouldn't be penalized for incomplete homework, their grades should have increased.

Instead, students were confused, turned in their homework at lower rates, and demonstrated a reluctance to reassess on material that they hadn't mastered. Instead of taking advantage of the chance to raise their

scores, they appeared content to accept the initial grade.

After coping with our grief, my staff and I talked about what we could do. Teachers made adjustments. We increased formative assessments. We added reassessment windows. We delineated between assignments that could be retaken and ones that couldn't.

Slowly, things began to change. We heard the students using the language that we were using. Families were reaching out with questions about reassessments. Teachers began to settle into a rhythm.

We codified our work. We redesigned grading criteria, held meetings where teachers shared what was working and what wasn't, and showed videos of students walking through their assignments to current and prospective families.

Eventually, standards-based instruction became part of who we were. Families and kids entered the community knowing that we would work hard to build relationships and that students' grades would be a reflection of the skill they had mastered—not how competent they were at following the rules. At our school, you would know which standards your child had mastered and which ones they were still working to develop.

We were never looking to penalize the kids who had figured out how to play the game of school; we were simply trying to create a fairer and more accurate system of assessment. One that encouraged students to have a sense of ownership of their learning.

Under our new system, I don't believe that the graduate who prompted my revelation would have earned the same A's and B's that got her into the high school she wasn't prepared for—at least not right away. I like to imagine that she would have risen to meet the challenge and that we would have been more attuned to her skill gaps.

Of course, even if we had transitioned to standards-based instruction sooner, our system would still be imperfect. All grading systems are.

Authentic learning happens over time and looks different for each of us. We master skills at our own pace. We comprehend when we're ready, not because of an imaginary end point in time. Grading doesn't naturally reflect learning; it highlights comparisons, averaging, and sorting.

While my teachers and I knew that we could not upend the paradigm of grading in education, we knew we could try to find the most authentic way of playing that game—for every other kid who came through our doors. ■

Matthew Ebert is a consultant, writer, speaker, and principal coach with more than 20 years of experience in education, primarily focused on school leadership in urban settings. He has previously been a teacher, a director of academic innovation, an academy leader, and a school principal.

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