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Investigating the Potential Benefits of Standards-Based Grading Practices at Urban Secondary Schools in Southern Utah: A Qualitative Study

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Overview: The letter-grade method has been used for many decades but may not be the best for reporting student achievement. The purpose of this qualitative study is to evaluate whether other grading methods are more effective in promoting student achievement and learning.
Introduction
The letter-grading system has been used for many decades in public education. Recent research suggests that this method may not be the best way to communicate student learning (Guskey, 2019; Knight & Cooper, 2019). Often, teachers factor non-learning elements into a student's grade, such as classroom behavior and attendance (Scarlett, 2018). When these non-learning elements are included, students' grades can be inflated or lowered, making them inaccurate representations of student learning (Arsyad Arrafii, 2020). Another potential issue with the letter grade system is that students tend to focus on earning a particular grade instead of learning the course material (Buckmiller et al., 2017). Many students agreed that the letter grade system does not adequately measure what they have learned (Erbes et al., 2021).

Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) discussed the need for a switch to standards-based grading, which separates a student's content mastery from their work habits, and more clearly outlines areas of proficiency and weakness. Standards-based grading practices allow teachers to encourage students to engage with the content and focus on mastering it (Boesdorfer & Daugherty, 2020). Many students and schools prefer the letter-grade method for various reasons (Erbes et al., 2021). This research study sought to understand the advantages and disadvantages of letter grading and standards-based grading in terms of promoting student achievement and reporting student learning to stakeholders. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of each grading method can inform best grading practices for educators.

Letter grades create barriers to learning because students tend to become focused on earning a particular grade rather than on mastering the material (Buckmiller et al., 2017). Many parents are familiar with this system because it is most likely the one that they experienced during their secondary school years (Peters et al., 2017). There are still many colleges and universities that continue to use letter grading, which may also be a reason for high schools to continue its use to provide a smooth transition for students as they move on to higher education institutions (Peters et al., 2017).

Standards-based grading is a progressive alternative to grading that may more adequately serve educators and students, as well as communicate student learning more accurately (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Achievement averages on standardized tests were higher among students whose teachers employed standards-based grading methods than those who used traditional letter grading practices (Veenstra, 2021). On the year-end SAGE test, students in a standards-based grading cohort scored 11.5% higher than their peers in the traditional letter grading cohort (Poll, 2019). Standards-based grading encourages students to engage with and master course objectives (Townsley, 2019). This method focuses on progression toward mastery, which can reduce students’ anxiety and give them the courage to take risks in their learning (Dempsey & Huber, 2020). Under this grading system, teachers’ curriculum is often more aligned with the state standards and better meets the needs of each learner (Pak et al., 2020). Teaching becomes responsive to learning as students monitor their progress and receive targeted, helpful feedback (Buckmiller et al., 2017). There are challenges in transitioning to standards-based grading for educators, students, and parents, as this system differs greatly from the traditional letter grading system.

It is important for educators to utilize grading methods that foster student learning, promote student achievement, and accurately communicate student progress to stakeholders. Standards-based grading is associated with best teaching practices that differentiate instruction and create a student-centered learning environment (Knight & Cooper, 2019). When standards-based grading follows a specific set of principles to assess student learning, the resulting grades more accurately reflect students’ mastery of course material (Scarlett, 2018).
The participants in this basic qualitative research study included ten teachers, four parents, and two secondary school principals who have experienced both the letter and standards-based grading methods in recent years. This study was guided by three research questions. Research question one explored the reasons educators believe that standards-based or letter grading methods have a greater impact on student achievement at secondary schools in southern Utah. Findings were split, with ten of 12 educators affirming that standards-based grading improved student learning outcomes the most. Two educators were in favor of standards-based grading but did not feel this method increased or decreased student achievement. The other educator did not have strong feelings about either grading method.

Research question two investigated parent beliefs regarding standards-based or letter grading methods in terms of improving student achievement and reporting learning. Multiple reasons were revealed for preferring one system over the other. Some parents preferred the clarity and anxiety-reducing aspects of standards-based grading and felt this system provided a coherent overview of their child’s progress. Others favored awarding a grade for every assignment and believe letter grades better motivate students to excel.

Research question three delved into educators’ views of the advantages and disadvantages of each grading method. All educators readily admitted that letter grading is an easier method to implement than standards-based grading. Yet most educators argued that standards-based grading provides all stakeholders with a more accurate report of student learning. Many teachers and one principal claimed standards-based grading methods have improved their instructional practices and led to greater student achievement.

Many educator and parent participants voiced concerns regarding the inadequacy of letter grades to properly represent student learning. Students may focus more on accumulating points and earning a letter grade than mastering course material (Buckmiller et al., 2017). Educators expressed concerns that letter grade methods concentrate on work completed rather than knowledge and skills mastered. Participants were troubled over grade lowering or inflation due to attendance, classroom behavior, and other non-learning elements. These practices inappropriately represent what students have truly learned (Scarlett, 2018). Related letter-grade concerns of parents surrounded a teacher’s subjective weighting of assignments and lack of opportunities for students to repeat/revise assignments. Students themselves often admit letter grades do not appropriately reflect what they have learned (Erbes et al., 2021).

Standards-based grading provides students with multiple opportunities to achieve and demonstrate proficiency. Some parents and students reported dismay that every assignment a student completes is not recorded or given a grade under standards-based grading practices. Educators acknowledged this grading paradigm shift can be difficult for stakeholders to understand and embrace. Homework and assignments are viewed as practice under standards-based grading methods, wherein students can simply focus on learning and mastering course material (Townsley, 2019a). Educators described the reluctance of some students to engage in these practice assignments because they are aware their grade will be unaffected by them. They maintained the remedy to this problem is educating students and parents about the purpose and research behind standards-based grading. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) explained standards-based grading separates content mastery from students’
work habits and is a superior method for discovering areas of proficiency and weakness. Educators affirmed that standards-based grading restores the purpose of education to properly educate students and accurately report student achievement.

Findings from this study suggest standards-based grading likely leads to greater learning outcomes. Some educators provided clear evidence of elevated student learning and growth, particularly on end-of-level assessments. Prior research aligns with these findings, as students utilizing standards-based grading procedures scored higher on year-end assessments than those using letter grade methods (Poll, 2019; Veenstra, 2021). Increases in proficiency were often attributed to the clarity of learning objectives and grading rubrics, improved instructional practices, meaningful feedback, and intentional, focused assessments. Other teachers reported achievement was neither enhanced nor decreased because of standards-based grading implementation.

In terms of motivation to learn, most parents concluded letter grades encourage students to put forth more effort. Students may appreciate the competition engendered by letter-grades, which can promote productive behaviors (Erbes et al., 2021). Some teachers agreed students may be less motivated by standards-based grading, but they argued that standards-based grading requires students to self-monitor and self-assess their progress, which is conducive to deeper learning. Standards-based grading makes students partners in their learning as they progress toward mastering clearly defined and well-taught concepts and standards (Knight & Cooper, 2019). While parents admitted letter grades may be more motivating, they also produce greater anxiety for students. They explained this is exacerbated when teachers weigh certain assignments heavily or inconsistent grading practices are used within schools. Letter grades prompt students to focus on earning a particular grade rather than learning course concepts, which creates anxiety for students (Dempsey & Huber, 2020).

Educators reported that standards-based grading practices increased teacher workload, especially during the initial implementation period. Teachers had to re-evaluate and reconfigure their teaching and assessment strategies. Townsley (2019) agreed that standards-based grading requires time and effort for teachers to adapt. Prior studies revealed teachers find this undertaking worthwhile, as it leads to more purposeful planning and comprehension of students’ academic needs (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Educators likewise confirmed an improvement in their instructional practices and an enhanced focus on strategic instruction, which they assert has been highly beneficial for their students. Principals applauded teachers’ efforts to redesign their assessments and teaching strategies to align with standards-based grading practices. They contended the clarity students gain from well-defined objectives and rubrics helps them understand what proficiency looks like and provides a clear and supportive path for them to achieve it.

**Preceding studies claimed standards-based grading is a progressive method that encourages best teaching practices, a culture of student-centered learning, and effective measures to report student achievement** (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Most study participants believed that letter grades are an outdated practice that is still in use due to familiarity and tradition but is not in students’ best interests. Present-day research contends standards-based grading methods foster a curriculum that is well-aligned with state standards and better meets the needs of each learner (Pak et al., 2020). Eighty percent of participants endorsed standards-based grading as a superior teaching and learning practice in secondary education classrooms. Principals explained more schools are currently piloting standards-based grading practices within various classes. They believed additional secondary schools in the district would likewise transition to these methods.

**Results from this study highlight the difficulty in transitioning to standards-based grading methods because letter grading is a familiar**
system rooted in tradition. Community education and support are critical factors in successful standards-based grading implementation. Recent research and outcomes from this study suggest that standards-based grading likely increases student achievement, reduces student learning anxiety, and more accurately reports student learning. As communities partner with schools and families to better understand and support standards-based grading practices, schools will be more focused on their primary purpose of educating students, assessing student learning, and reporting student progress to stakeholders.

References


