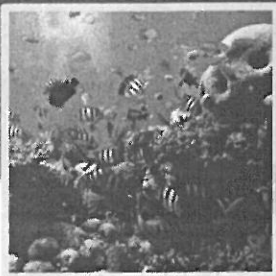


# Mastery-Based Report Cards

July 2013



In the following report, Hanover Research discusses the implementation of mastery-based report cards in school districts across the country, focusing particularly on barriers to implementation, including the need to gain parent approval and effectively communicate the goals of the reporting structure.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

### INTRODUCTION

The mastery-based report card is the product of teaching and learning in a standards-based educational environment in the age of accountability. With states increasingly adopting Common Core standards and high-stakes standardized testing, almost every aspect of education is linked to specific learning goals. Grading, however, has remained in the realm of the subjective, with common letter grades reflecting a vast amount of information that is explicitly revealed neither to students nor their parents. Over the past 10 years, and even more so in the last five, increasing attention has been paid to standards-based or mastery-based grading systems. In the opinion of many educators, such systems allow students to keep better track of the individual components of their overall progress toward meeting learning goals.

The benefits of implementing a standards-based report card have yet to be studied in depth.<sup>1</sup> A small number of studies have been conducted that look at teacher and parent perceptions of standards-based report cards, and an even smaller number study the link between student achievement and the grading procedure. It may not be essential for this relationship to be studied, however, since districts that explain the rationale behind their move to standards-based report cards rarely, if ever, cite anticipated improvements in student achievement. Instead, standards-based report cards tend to be adopted principally to ensure that student learning is standards-based, and to provide transparency in student performance and evaluation procedures to stakeholders.

The first section of this report explores standards- or mastery-based report cards from several angles, spanning from implementation to outcomes. The second section of the report focuses on strategies for managing parents' expectations and informing them of the new procedures in an effort to avoid the significant backlash that other districts have experienced. The third section briefly reviews the experiences of three school districts in implementing mastery-based report cards.

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<sup>1</sup> Cherniss, Alex. "Standards Based Report Card: Teachers' Perception on the Development, Transition, and Implementation." University of Southern California. May 2008. p. 29.  
<http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15799coll127/id/42505/rec/1>

## KEY FINDINGS

- Standards-based grading stems from a desire to hold all students across schools and districts to consistent educational standards; to make student progress toward meeting learning goals more visible to students, parents, and teachers; and to hold students increasingly accountable for their educational progress. It also ensures that districts set forth clear expectations for students, providing them with a specific understanding of what it takes to succeed.
- A small body of literature has attempted to link standards-based grading systems with changes in student assessment performance. The results of these studies typically show that the two do not have a direct relationship, and that implementing standards-based report cards does not result in improved student performance. Districts do not typically cite a desire to improve student performance as a reason for implementing the new grading system, however.
- State standards are too numerous and specific to represent good grade reporting indicators. The amount of information teachers would be expected to collect, and parents to subsequently interpret, would be overwhelming. Districts must take time to distill state standards into a handful of easily-traceable ability statements. In doing so, districts should consider the relative importance of each skill to students' further academic careers.
- Once standards are identified, a grading rubric must be developed. Typically, schools grade students using a numerical scale, but others have used alternative letter scales, words, and phrases to indicate standards-based achievement.
- Significant attention must be paid to establishing parent support for the report card reform. In the experience of some districts, parents have resisted changes to the grading scheme with which they are familiar. Parents must be made to understand the rationale behind the move to standards-based grading, given opportunities to provide feedback before implementation, and guided through the process of interpreting their children's grades. FAQ documents and guides are readily available on most districts' websites for parents to reference.
- Across the districts reviewed for this report, standards-based report cards are far more common at the elementary level than in later grades. When the procedure is in place in high schools, grades are often assigned with letter grade equivalence, to assuage fears about whether colleges will understand the alternative grading system.
- The implementation process ranges from one to four or more years. Districts spend considerable time and resources planning for the use of standards-based report cards. Time is spent developing standards, developing the grading rubrics, and earning stakeholder buy-in for the idea, all of which is followed by a pilot study and community feedback.

## SECTION I: THE MASTERY-BASED REPORT CARD

Federal law under No Child Left Behind stipulates that all children must master their state's standards and meet benchmarks in core subject areas, with the nation's schools evaluated based on the percentage of students who achieve proficiency. The increase in standards-specific accountability for schools, teachers, and students under state and federal mechanisms has led to changes in traditional, ongoing grading efforts, shifting them away from vague, letter-based statements and tying them more explicitly to state standards.

**Mastery-based reporting reflects a belief among educators that all students can learn,** given sufficient time and appropriate instructional supports. In grading schemes, educators expect students to demonstrate achievement explicitly commensurate with state standards, evaluating students on the degree of achievement evident at each reporting juncture. More common than the term *mastery-based reporting* is the term *standards-based reporting*—the two ultimately indicate the same approach to student progress reporting, though there may be slight nuances and differences in interpretation. Standards-based reporting emphasizes the need for students to meet specific standards, while mastery-based reporting implies that the district values a higher degree of learning than simply meeting a standard. The two terms are often used interchangeably, however—indeed, school districts implementing what they call “standards-based” grading reform may place a high value on achieving beyond a mere standard.

The major push behind standards-based reporting on student progress comes from a desire to hold students to a consistent standard, to make student progress more visible to students themselves as well as teachers and parents, and to make students accountable to themselves for their own progress. Districts adopting achievement-based report cards hope that shifting the focus of progress reporting will “ensure more consistent grading across classrooms, tamp down on grade inflation, and refine focus on individual academic skills.”<sup>2</sup> The philosophy of mastery- or standards-based reporting enables students, parents, and teachers to see where specific strengths and deficits lie at each evaluation point, providing more nuanced information than a simple letter grade provides. It is not merely a mechanism for evaluating students and checking up on their progress, however; mastery reporting also ensures that districts develop clear expectations for students from the outset, which prepares students for success during the year as they know what they need to achieve to reach a mastery level of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Mastery reporting is based on several principles:

- All students can learn
- People learn in different ways and at different rates
- With favorable learning conditions, the effects of individual differences diminish
- Most learning difficulties occur as a result of uncorrected learning errors

<sup>2</sup> Hu, Winnie. “Report Cards Give Up A’s and B’s for 4s and 3s.” *New York Times*. 25 March 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/25/education/25cards.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>3</sup> Citation for text box: “Parent Guide to the District’s Standard-Based Report Card.” Dearborn Public Schools. [http://dearbornschools.org/downloads/doc\\_download/97-parent-guide-to-district-standard-based-report-card](http://dearbornschools.org/downloads/doc_download/97-parent-guide-to-district-standard-based-report-card)

**The problem with conventional letter-based grading systems is that such systems compare students with each other, rather than against a stated set of standards.** Grading on a curve makes it difficult to accurately know how much students have learned. In the words of one author, “They could all have done miserably, just some less miserably than others.”<sup>4</sup> This effect is illustrated by a recent student rebellion at Johns Hopkins University. In a computer programming class, the professor indicated that the grade earned by the highest-performing student on an exam would become equivalent to 100 percent, and students would be graded on a curve based on that scale. The students banded together and boycotted the final exam, meaning the highest score earned was zero—and every student earned an A.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional letter-based grading systems not only compare students with each other between classes and grades, but also across schools within a single district. Montgomery County Schools in Maryland implemented standards-based grading across a number of its elementary schools “to ensure more consistent grading practices across diverse communities ... where there are pockets of low-income families.”<sup>6</sup> Adopting standards-based reporting ensures that students are being assessed by measures of their own level of progress, rather than the progress or performance of their peers.

There is evidence that standards-based reporting has exactly this impact. Positive anecdotal evidence comes from one New York elementary school where students report that they feel more in control of their grades—for example, a fourth grader set specific goals (“working on grammar, ... increasing comprehension”) and has received concrete feedback on her progress toward meeting them, while a fifth grader set a goal of improving his writing score, did so, and was able to pinpoint the specific actions he undertook in order to achieve the goal (“I didn’t rush through my work ... I looked in the dictionary”).<sup>7</sup>

However, **evidence that standards-based report cards are specifically tied to improved student performance is insufficient at present**, in part because few studies have attempted to measure this link. Research conducted for a dissertation submitted to the Northeastern University School of Education in 2011 suggested that standards-based report cards may not be an effective strategy for improving students’ academic performance. The study of 103 Massachusetts elementary schools found that there was “no significant difference in the performance or growth of schools whether or not they use[d] one overall grade in a content area or several newly developed performance levels.” Specifically, in grade 4 math classes, standards-based report cards did not produce higher levels of growth and performance than did traditional letter-graded report cards.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Levitt, Steven. “How to Game a Grading Curve.” Freakonomics. 20 February 2013.  
<http://www.freakonomics.com/2013/02/20/how-to-game-a-grading-curve/>

<sup>6</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Craig, Theresa. “Effects of Standards-Based Report Cards on Student Learning.” Northeastern University. January 2011. pp. 103-104. [http://iris.lib.neu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=education\\_theses](http://iris.lib.neu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=education_theses)

## CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Below, we identify four major challenges districts encounter when implementing standards-based grading systems (strategies for encouraging parental acceptance, one of the largest obstacles to standards-based grading adoption, are discussed separately in the subsequent section). Here, we discuss challenges in establishing the standards against which students will be measured, establishing a grading scale, earning teacher support for the idea, and grading students with learning disabilities.

### *ESTABLISHING STANDARDS*

States hold their students to a wide range of standards which necessarily vary by grade level and subject. One of the main challenges to mastery-based reporting is identifying which standards to focus on, evaluate, and report. **Standards for all learning are too numerous to be useful across every grading period.** Indeed, when three Kentucky school districts looked at implementing standards-based grading, “the first step was reducing the long lists of student learning standards” outlined in the state’s Common Core to just a handful of usable standards.<sup>9</sup> This process recognizes that teachers would find it burdensome to account for student progress on each of the Common Core standards as written, and parents would be overwhelmed with the amount of information received at the end of each grading period.

**The degree to which state standards are simplified for the purpose of report cards is not consistent,** however. For the three-district Kentucky pilot study, researchers created standards that generally align to the major domains of student learning covered by the Common Core. So, for instance, the elementary report for English language arts evaluates students on their performance in five broad categories: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language.<sup>10</sup> Ohio’s Wooster City School District, on the other hand, evaluates second grade language arts students on a wholly different set of standards—standards which still align with the state’s standards, but are much more detailed and reflective of specific student abilities (see Figure 1.1 on the following page).<sup>11</sup>

It does appear that Wooster City School District’s strategy is more common than that undertaken by the Kentucky pilot districts. A major goal of standards-based reporting is to ensure that students and parents gain a specific understanding of academic strengths and weaknesses, and the general learning categories adopted by the Kentucky districts are not highly revealing. However, there is no established best practice regarding how specific reporting standards should be, and it ultimately falls to the district to determine what the goal of the report card will be.

<sup>9</sup> Guskey, Thomas, Gerry Swan, and Lee Ann Jung. “Grades that Mean Something.” *Kappan Magazine*. 93(2):2011. pp. 53-54. <https://kyp20nxgla.wikispaces.com/file/view/Grades+That+Mean+Something.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> “WCS Standards Based Report Cards.” Wooster City School District.

<http://www.woostercityschools.org/district/content-page/wcs-standards-based-report-cards>

**Figure 1.1: Wooster City Schools Grade 2 Language Arts Reporting Standards**

- Reads sight words
- Asks and answers questions to demonstrate understanding
- Retells stories
- Reads fluently
- Compares/contrasts two or more versions of the same story
- Reads and comprehends stories, poetry, and informational text at grade level
- Identifies main idea
- Produces and organizes a variety of types of writing
- Engages in prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
- Participates in shared research and writing projects
- Individually and collaboratively participates in discussions
- Demonstrates proper usage of capitalization and punctuation
- Demonstrates proper usage of spelling
- Uses grammar correctly when writing or speaking
- Uses strategies to clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple meaning words

Source: Wooster City School District

One researcher from the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education states that **three considerations are important in determining which skills should be selected for inclusion on standards-based report cards.** To help identify the objectives which are most important, consider:<sup>12</sup>

- **Endurance:** Skills that will stay with students for a long time
- **Leverage:** Skills that are applicable to many academic disciplines
- **Readiness for the next level of instruction:** Skills that students must have for success in the next grade/course

Regardless of how generalized a district makes its reported standards, some consideration must also be given to the number of standards measured in each reporting period. A larger number of standards means that students see more specific feedback, but it quickly becomes burdensome for teachers and parents. Pelham Elementary School, for example, evaluates grade 2 students across 39 skill categories representing separate measures in core subjects and several "learning behavior" categories such as responsibility and organization. The 39 skill categories come with a 14-page guide to interpretation for parents.<sup>13</sup> Considering that letter grades require no similar guide to interpretation, it is easy to understand why parents quickly become overwhelmed with a newly implemented standards-based grading system.

<sup>12</sup> Welsh, Megan. "Standards-Based Grading." Connecticut Assessment Forum. 13 Aug 2012. P. 18.  
<http://assessment.education.uconn.edu/assessment/assets/Conferences/2012-CAF/Welsh-Standards-based-Grading.pptx>

<sup>13</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.



### DIFFERENTIATING GRADING CRITERIA

Standards-based grading criteria look different from one district to another. One district may identify a student's progress as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations, while another may use terminology reflecting a student's progress toward meeting standards. In order to determine how schools will define students' academic progress, they first must define what it is they seek to measure.<sup>14</sup> Guskey and Jung identify three categories of work:<sup>15</sup>

- **Product**, which relates to students' achievements or performance on exams, reports, projects, or overall assessments.
- **Process**, which relates to students' effort, class behavior, and work habits and may also reflect performance on daily work, quizzes, homework, and classroom participation.
- **Progress**, which relates to how much students actually gain from their learning experience and is a measure of how far students have come rather than where they are in their learning.

The standard letter grade, says Guskey, combines measures of the three categories into one indicator whose true meaning is obscured. **Standards-based grading enables teachers to create separate measures of progress, product, and process and report separately on each.** Students and parents thereby gain a more thorough understanding of student performance, and teachers more clearly communicate their expectations. Teachers benefit from such a grading format as well, since "they no longer have to combine these diverse types of information into a single grade."<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of what category of student achievement is being evaluated, the idea of a sliding scale with mastery at the top can be problematic. Instead, most districts implementing mastery-based reporting use a numerical scale or a qualitative scale indicating student progress, culminating in the equivalent of "demonstrates mastery" or above. Because mastery is usually not expected until the end of large units or even entire school years, however, the highest marks "are generally not available until the final marking period."<sup>17</sup>

The parents of students in one New York school were concerned that this would result in a school culture which embraces lower standards. The school, Pelham Elementary School, implemented standards-based reporting using a four-point grading scale, where the lowest mark indicates a student is not meeting state standards and the highest indicates the student meets standards "with distinction." Thus, a score of two is common during the school year. As one parent notes, students "are running around the school saying '2 is cool'

<sup>14</sup> Guskey, Thomas and Lee Ann Jung. "The Challenges of Standards-Based Grading." *Leadership Compass*. 4(2):2006. <http://www.indianriverschools.org/SiteDirectory/ProfDev/Grading%20Practices%20Documents/Reporting%20Grades/The%20Challenge%20of%20Standards-Based%20Grading.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.

... but in my world 2 out of 4 is not cool.” In response to parent feedback, Pelham moved to change the reporting structure to use benchmarks for each reporting period, rather than focusing on year-end achievement, thus allowing students to earn the highest marks from the beginning of the year.<sup>18</sup>

**Districts adopt a variety of grading scales, using everything from phrases and letters to numbers and symbols to indicate student progress.** Figure 1.2 offers examples of grading scales from a variety of school districts. There is no established “best practices” grading scale to use; similar to the case of learning standards above, what works best for a district will largely be determined by the district’s goals in establishing standards-based grading. However, numerical grading scales do appear to be more commonly used than other systems, followed by letter-based scales, which tend to be abbreviations for phrases. Symbol-based systems are not common, but have been developed.

Grading criteria may change by grade level, as well. Figure 1.2 presents grading scales for several different grades. The numerical scale in place in Excelsior Springs is intended for use at the high school level, while Derry Township’s letter scale is taken from a grade 1 report card. **Higher grades may require more nuanced grading scales than early grades.**

**Figure 1.2: Sample Grading Scales**

Numerical Scale, Excelsior Springs School District <sup>19</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 4.0: The student demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the material by completing advanced applications of the material.</li> <li>▪ 3.0: The student has mastered the complex, targeted knowledge and skills for the class.</li> <li>▪ 2.0: The student understands the foundational material that supports the targeted learning, but is still working to master the complex material for the class.</li> <li>▪ 1.0: The student is able to demonstrate an understanding of the foundational material for the class with help from the teacher, but still struggles when working independently.</li> <li>▪ 0.0: Even with assistance from the teacher, the student shows no understanding of the material. A zero will not be given for missing work until the end of the semester.</li> </ul>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Standards-Based Grading Frequently Asked Questions.” Excelsior Springs School District. p. 3.  
<http://www.essd40.com/userfiles/3/HS/SBG%20Frequently%20Asked%20Questions%20-%20HS%20-%20print%20version.pdf>

<p><b>Symbol Scale, Process Goals, Kentucky Pilot Study<sup>20</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ + +: Consistently (e.g., All homework assignments were completed during the marking period with a high level of accuracy)</li> <li>▪ +: Moderately (e.g., Most homework assignments were completed during the marking period with a fair level of accuracy)</li> <li>▪ -: Rarely (e.g., Numerous homework assignments were missing during the marking period and/or the work was often inaccurate)</li> <li>▪ N/A: Not assessed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Letter Scale, Derry Township School District<sup>21</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ P: Proficient, indicates that a student has demonstrated mastery on a given standard and is meeting or exceeding grade level expectations</li> <li>▪ W<sub>1</sub>: Working toward proficiency with steady progress</li> <li>▪ W<sub>2</sub>: Working toward proficiency with limited progress</li> <li>▪ S: Satisfactory (used for learning characteristics, not academic standards)</li> <li>▪ N: Needs improvement (used for learning characteristics, not academic standards)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Phrase Scale, Greensburg Salem Elementary Schools<sup>22</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Meeting Expectations: Student demonstrates grade level skill without significant errors.</li> <li>▪ Exceeding Expectations: Student demonstrates understanding beyond grade level skills.</li> <li>▪ Approaching Expectations: Student is beginning to demonstrate grade level skill. Work may contain repeated errors and/or required teacher assistance.</li> </ul>

#### *PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER BUY-IN*

In theory, **teacher adoption of standards-based grading mechanisms should be relatively easy to achieve**, as grading under such a scheme is more straightforward. Instead of combining multiple measures of student achievement into one letter grade, teachers directly translate student activity into a determination of progress and performance across several measures. However, teachers, like parents, largely grew up with letter grades. They are familiar with how letter grades work and may resist a change they see as just another “newfangled fad.”<sup>23</sup>

Educators may express concern over the shift to standards-based grading because the traditional letter-based scheme is ingrained in educational culture. College admissions offices understand letter grades, for instance, but may have no experience interpreting standards-based grades. Additionally, there is concern over whether adopting standards-based grades in the later years of schooling will impact metrics such as class rank and GPA—numbers which are integral to college admissions and job applications.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Guskey, Thomas, Gerry Swan, and Lee Ann Jung, op. cit. p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> “1<sup>st</sup> Grade Trimester 1 Report Card.” Derry Township School District. P. 3-5.

<sup>22</sup> “Guide to the Standards Based Report Card.” Greensburg Salem School District. P. 3.

<http://www.greensburgsalem.org/cms/lib4/PA01001409/Centricity/Domain/11/Guide%20to%20the%20Standards%20Based%20Report%20Card.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Guskey and Jung, op. cit. p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.

Upon adoption of a standards-based grading system, teachers may require initial professional development activities to ensure they understand the system's purpose and how to implement it. Often, school districts develop teacher handbooks, hosted on the district website, to serve as a reference guide for teachers who have questions about the process. These handbooks commonly seek to identify the purpose of adopting standards-based grading, in addition to instructing teachers how to change their grading practices.

A common issue cited by teachers is the difficulty of scoring students on multiple measures, rather than assigning a student a grade based on his or her overall performance. Because the underlying mechanism of standards-based grading makes the process of grading more labor-intensive, teachers may resist its adoption. For example, in New Harbor Unified School District, math teachers struggled to determine under what skill category a student's performance should be graded, when a skill applied to several categories at once:<sup>25</sup>

It's hard to get in the habit of giving a math test and not just scoring the answers right or wrong. Now we check to see how they scored on the Measurement and Geometry section and the Algebra and Functions section because we use this on the report card ... If we're studying percents, how do I decide what strands to score the child on within the lesson? I could score the student on Number Sense but there may be other areas as well such as Mathematical Reasoning.

Given such concerns, it is critical that, during the development of the curricular standards to be measured, attention be paid to ensuring that the standards are clear, measurable, and do not overlap to a burdensome degree.

### *STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS*

Students with special needs stand to benefit in particular from the nuanced grading mechanism behind standards-based grading. Traditional grading schemes do not measure students on the *progress* they make toward standard mastery, but rather only on whether they have mastered a concept. However, without demonstrating proficiency in a subject, it can hardly be said that students should receive standard passing grades, either.<sup>26</sup> Because federal mandates, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, emphasize that all students progress toward end goals in the general curriculum, achievement reports for students with disabilities may not accurately reflect the state of a student's abilities. IEPs are informative for the areas for which goals have been developed, but goals are not developed for all students across all standards in a content area.<sup>27</sup>

The general process for using standards-based grading for the benefit of students with special needs is as follows:<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cherniss, Alex, op. cit. p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Guskey, Thomas and Lee Ann Jung, op. cit. p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> "Elementary Standards-Based Report Card Frequently Asked Questions." Hawaii Department of Education. [http://reportcard.k12.hi.us/teachers\\_admin/FAQ\\_teacher.htm](http://reportcard.k12.hi.us/teachers_admin/FAQ_teacher.htm)

<sup>28</sup> Bullet points quoted verbatim from: Welsh, Megan, op. cit. p. 19.

- Ask whether the standard is an appropriate expectation without adaptations
- If the standard is not appropriate, determine what type of adaptation the standard needs
- If the standard needs modification, determine the appropriate standard
- Base grades on the modified standard, not the grade-level standard
- Communicate the meaning of the grade

The utility of a standards-based grading approach for students with disabilities is evident in the development of specific standards-based report cards for students with special needs. Ventura County Public Schools, for instance, has developed an alternate standards-based report card “to provide parents with progress toward out-of-grade-level content standards when the student is unable to demonstrate meaningful progress toward the grade-level standards on the regular report card.”<sup>29</sup> The standards-based report card is not linked to IEP progress goals, but provides a snapshot of actual student abilities regardless of grade level.

As with most educational initiatives, success lies in implementation. While one district may find great benefit in standards-based grading for its special education students, another may struggle with challenges to implementation. For example, teachers in the New Harbor Unified School District are frustrated by the grading system’s impact on special education students. The grading rubric implemented in that district does not allow for any special consideration of a student’s needs, and requires that teachers only score students on their performance relative to expected grade level. Students who are doing very well and showing great progress, but still performing below grade level, are marked as demonstrating no grade-level proficiency. As one teacher notes, “It is frustrating because the only place where I can really give a positive mark is in the effort categories and that is harsh. There are some kids who are doing well in my program but the report card does not allow me to indicate any type of growth.”<sup>30</sup> In order to be beneficial to students with special needs, a standards-based report card needs to be designed with inherent flexibility.

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<sup>29</sup> “Alternate Standards-Based Report Card.” Ventura County Special Education Local Plan Area. P. 1.  
<http://www.venturacountyselpa.com/Portals/45/Users/Teacher%20Res/ASBRC%20Purpose%20and%20Procedures.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Cherniss, Alex, op. cit. p. 57.

## SECTION II: INTRODUCING MASTERY REPORT CARDS TO PARENTS

Introducing the standards-based report card to parents can be problematic. Parents largely grew up under letter-grading schemes, and articles aimed at explaining mastery-based report cards to parents often begin with anecdotes telling parents that gone are the days of rewarding children for the number of A's earned in each reporting period.<sup>31</sup> Parents are familiar with letter grades and understand what they mean about their child's performance; in comparison, **mastery-based grades can appear vague and frustrating**. One report found that shortly after implementing standards-based reporting systems, "most [educators] find themselves embroiled in controversy ... Discussions about the report card turn into heated debates."<sup>32</sup>

A school district outside San Francisco had to scale back plans to expand standards-based report cards, already in place in elementary schools, across its middle schools after parents protested school board meetings and signed petitions to stop the move. One parent stated that standards-based report cards resulted in a lowering of expectations for high-performing students, who could achieve above standards, but had no incentive to do so when mastery was the end goal.<sup>33</sup> A similar protest occurred within a school district in Rhode Island, where administrators attempted to implement standards-based reporting after two years of intensive work toward developing appropriate standards and evaluation rubrics. Upon the grading system's introduction, the community collected over 1,300 signatures petitioning the school district to reverse the changes to "one of the most sacred traditions in American education: the use of letter grades to denote student achievement."<sup>34</sup>

**The main challenge in implementing standards-based report cards is communicating their purpose and meaning to students, parents, and the community.** In a survey of teachers in one district which used standards-based report cards for three years, a majority of teachers cited parents as being the greatest challenge to implementing the new report card.<sup>35</sup> Without attention to effective communication, the new reporting mechanism may be viewed as just another fad in education without any real benefit to students. When the reporting format changes without the district first establishing the purpose of the change, "these efforts end up being short-lived experiments that are abandoned after a few troubled years of implementation."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> "Rethinking Report Cards." Great Schools. <http://www.greatschools.org/students/academic-skills/350-rethinking-report-cards.gs?page=all>

<sup>32</sup> Guskey, Thomas and Lee Ann Jung, op. cit. p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Hu, Winnie, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Cherniss, Alex, op. cit. p. 32-33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 61.

<sup>36</sup> Guskey, Thomas and Lee Ann Jung, op. cit.

In districts with high numbers of English language learners, additional communication problems exist. In order to gain parents' acceptance of standards-based grading, the purpose of the system, the mechanisms by which students will be evaluated, and the long-term goals and impact of the system must all be explained. This can be problematic when parents speak a language other than English, as teachers likely will not be able to field concerns from these parents. Report cards, as well as additional supporting materials, may need to be translated into a second language.

Teachers have also experienced difficulty in communicating to parents precisely what each new grade means. Parents understand that a D or an F is a failing grade, but when faced with a "1," parents are unsure what it actually means for their child's performance.<sup>37</sup> As one teacher stated, "parents are slower to react to their child receiving a '1' in Reading than if I would be able to assign them an 'F.'"<sup>38</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents of higher-performing students do not tend to demonstrate as high a degree of reluctance to embrace standards-based grading. Parents of such students are generally appreciative of the additional information.<sup>39</sup>

In order to help parents to relate to the new grading system, **many districts offer equivalency charts either on their websites or directly on the report cards themselves**, enabling parents to draw parallels between the traditional grading structure and the grades their children receive. Excelsior Springs High School, which grades students on a 4-point scale, including decimal values of mastery, publishes a frequently asked questions document for parents, students, and teachers. This document offers the following conversion chart.

**Figure 2.1: Excelsior Springs High School Grade Conversion Chart**

LETTER	GRADE	LETTER	GRADE	LETTER	GRADE
A	3.75-4.00	B-	2.75-2.99	D+	1.50-1.74
A-	3.50-3.74	C+	2.50-2.74	D	1.25-1.49
B	3.25-3.49	C	2.00-2.49	D-	1.00-1.24
B-	3.00-3.24	C-	1.75-1.99	F	0.00-0.99

Source: Excelsior Springs High School<sup>40</sup>

Other districts go into even greater detail in an effort to support parents' understanding of their children's grades. The Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township, which utilizes standards-based grading across all grades and in all schools, presents a grading scale with letter and percentage equivalents for standards-based grades, as well as qualitative descriptions of the level of mastery reflected in each grade. Additionally, the charts are broken out by grade level. Figure 2.2 highlights the breadth of data available to parents to aid their understanding of students' grades.

<sup>37</sup> Cherniss, Alex, op. cit. p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> "Standards-Based Grading Frequently Asked Questions," op. cit. p. 3.

Figure 2.2: Wayne Township Schools K-8 Grade Equivalency Chart

GRADE LEVEL STANDARDS	SCORING GUIDE	PERCENT BASED	LETTER GRADE	DESCRIPTION OF ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL
Exemplary	4	100-90	A+ to A-	The student demonstrates mastery at or above the 90% level on the appropriate state standards.
Proficient	3	89-80	B+ to B-	The student demonstrates mastery at or above the 80% level on the appropriate state standards.
Progressing	2	79-70	C+ to C-	The student demonstrates mastery at or above the 70% level on the appropriate state standards.
Not Yet Meeting Standard	1	Below 70	F	The student did not demonstrate achievement at or above the 70% level on the appropriate state standards.

Source: Wayne Township Schools<sup>41</sup>

Such information helps parents to relate to the scores their children receive under a standards-based rubric. Instead of feeling unperturbed by their child receiving a “1,” using the equivalency chart parents can see that a grade of “1” is equivalent to an “F” grade under a more familiar grading rubric. Parents may then be more motivated to intervene in their child’s education to ensure grades are improved.

Grade equivalency charts help parents relate to standards-based grades, but alone do not cover the range of ideas necessary to communicate to parents about the grading system. **Districts that have implemented standards-based grading almost universally offer a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document** or a guide to interpreting the new report cards. For example, the San Diego Unified School District offers parent guides for student report cards by grade level, in both English and Spanish.<sup>42</sup> These guides explain the purpose of standards-based report cards, define proficiency levels, and list achievement standards for each subject area. There is additionally a graphic which demonstrates how to read the report card.<sup>43</sup>

Developing a tool for communicating with parents about standards-based grading is relatively straightforward in that many other districts have established a precedent. In examining FAQ documents across a variety of school districts, Hanover compiled the following list of common questions districts choose to answer specifically for parents:

- What is a standards-based report card?
- What are the state’s standards?
- Will my child be evaluated on standards other than academic knowledge and skills?

<sup>41</sup> “Grading Scale.” Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township. <http://www.wayne.k12.in.us/district/grading-scale.asp>

<sup>42</sup> “Standards-Based Report Card.” San Diego Unified School District. <http://old.sandi.net/sbrc/>

<sup>43</sup> “Standards-Based Report Card, First Grade.” San Diego Unified School District. [http://old.sandi.net/sbrc/parent\\_guide\\_1.pdf](http://old.sandi.net/sbrc/parent_guide_1.pdf)



- Why is the school adopting a standards-based grading system?
- What grades might my child receive, and what do they mean?
- How are standards-based report cards different from traditional report cards?
- Will my child be motivated without letter grades?
- How does a standards-based report card measure my child's progress?
- How is standard mastery determined? Can my child master concepts before the end of the year?
- What can I do to help my child achieve mastery on the standards?
- How often will I receive a standards-based report card?
- Are there any problems with standards-based report cards?
- Do colleges understand standards-based grading systems?

Other questions may likely be asked, and there are numerous examples of unique questions addressed in FAQ documents. However, those listed above are the most common and address basic recurring parental concerns.

## SECTION III: EXAMPLES OF STANDARDS-BASED REPORT CARD IMPLEMENTATION

This section reviews the implementation process, grading scales, and parent communication efforts undertaken at three school districts that use standards-based grading procedures. The three districts selected for profiling include the following:

- Dearborn Public Schools, Michigan
- Howell Township Public School District, New Jersey
- Boulder Valley School District, Colorado

### DEARBORN PUBLIC SCHOOLS (MICHIGAN)

Dearborn Public Schools is one of the few districts that refers to its grading procedure as a “mastery-based” system, rather than a “standards-based” system. In classrooms in which mastery-based reporting is used in lieu of traditional report cards, instructional strategies are tailored to support mastery learning. Classrooms may incorporate small group instruction, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, discovery learning, discussion groups, and other strategies for supporting student learning on specific measures.<sup>44</sup>

In a guide developed to help parents understand the mechanics of mastery learning, the district identifies several key components of the classroom dynamic: **formative and summative assessment, feedback, enrichment, acceleration, and correctives**. Teachers use formative assessments to determine whether students understand material which has just been presented, while summative assessment is used at the end of whole units to ensure students achieve overall mastery.<sup>45</sup> Teachers use the information from these assessments to identify whether students require intervention to catch up to their peers. Students who score highly on assessments can move into enrichment or acceleration groups, which enable them to “broaden, expand, or deepen their learning” on a subject or to skip units altogether.<sup>46</sup>

The feedback element in mastery learning informs students of precisely what is expected of them and identifies their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers are able to suggest to students areas of study that may require more attention, enabling students to remedy learning deficits early and often. Students who are unable to or have not mastered the material despite this guidance receive correctives, or interventions using different teaching and learning methods. After the corrective, the student takes the assessment again for content mastery.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> “Parent Guide to the District’s Standard-Based Report Card.” Op. cit. pp. 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Students in grades 1-5 receive grades based on one of four designations: exceeds expectations, meets expectations, progressing, or area of concern. In kindergarten, the terminology used is slightly different, with students assigned one of three designations: mastery, developing, or beginning status.<sup>48</sup>

The parent information guide consists of answers to only two questions: what is mastery learning, and why do we need mastery-based grading. Following the answers to these questions is a list of suggestions for parents who wish to support their children's success. The list includes suggestions such as creating a supportive home environment, encouraging the child to eat and sleep well, giving the child regular chores, and ensuring the student arrives to school on time each day.<sup>49</sup>

The guide includes a brief comparison of the salient features of standards-based report cards and traditional letter grades. Figure 3.1 presents some of the major differences between the two, as described in Dearborn Public Schools' parent guide.

**Figure 3.1: Comparison between Traditional and Standards-Based Report Cards**

TRADITIONAL REPORT CARD	STANDARDS BASED REPORT CARD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Subjects are listed by name.</li> <li>▪ Letter grades A-F reflect an individual teacher's expectations, student effort, and achievement.</li> <li>▪ Curriculum and instruction are teacher-centered, textbook-driven, and not necessarily aligned to state standards.</li> <li>▪ Grading based on percentages and rankings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Major subject area defined by benchmarks and curriculum standards.</li> <li>▪ Performance levels indicate mastery of the grade level standards. Achievement and effort are reported separately.</li> <li>▪ Instruction is aligned with state and district benchmarks and curriculum standards.</li> <li>▪ Grading is based on mastery. All students can achieve.</li> </ul>

Source: Dearborn Public Schools<sup>50</sup>

### HOWELL TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT (NEW JERSEY)

Howell Township Public Schools will be introducing standards-based report cards beginning with the academic year 2013-2014. The decision to adopt standards-based reporting came after four years of considering how the district wanted to measure student progress and inform parents of specific performance measures. Administrators from schools across the district created a committee to study assessment and grade reporting, which ultimately culminated in the decision to move forward with standards-based grading.<sup>51</sup>

Administrators undertook the four-year study process upon the recognition that the typical letter-based grading system "did not fully communicate what students are expected to know and be able to do as set forth in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> "Standards-Based Report Cards." Howell Township Public Schools.  
[http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/news\\_main.aspx?id=951](http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/news_main.aspx?id=951)

Standards.”<sup>52</sup> The district expects the new grading structure to better inform students of what is expected of them and provide parents with a more detailed understanding of their child’s progress.

Elementary school students will be graded on standards achievement using a numerical scale with phrased equivalencies. Figure 3.2 presents the elementary school grading rubric that will be adopted this year.<sup>53</sup>

**Figure 3.2: Elementary School Grading Rubric, Howell Township Schools**

NUMERICAL GRADE	PHRASE	DESCRIPTION
4	Expands [sic] grade level standards	A “4” indicates the student has advanced understanding and exceeds grade level expectations. A student receiving a “4” demonstrates academically superior skills in that specific area. This student shows initiative, challenges himself or herself, and demonstrates this advanced knowledge at school. A “4” is difficult to obtain.
3	Meets grade level standards	A “3” indicates the student has proficient understanding and meets grade level expectations. We want all of our students to reach a level “3.” A student receiving a “3” is right on track with our high academic expectations.
2	Progressing toward grade level standards	A “2” indicates the student has basic understanding and is partially proficient at meeting grade level expectations. A student receiving a “2” understands the basic concepts or skill, but has not yet reached the proficient level. A “2” should indicate that the student’s performance varies in consistency with regards to accuracy, quality, and level of support.
1	Not meeting grade level standards	A “1” indicates the student has minimal understanding and does not meet grade-level expectations. Performance is inconsistent even with guidance and support.
Blank	Not assessed at this time	These standards have not been addressed at this time. However, standards will be introduced before the end of the school year.

Source: Howell Township Schools

The district states that, because the standards reflect end-of-year expectations, students who typically earn high grades from the outset of the year will likely be surprised to find that they do not earn highest marks on the new report card until later in the year. While this is considered normal, it is disconcerting for both students and parents and has posed problems for other districts in the past seeking stakeholder support. The district also outlines an example wherein a student who typically earns A’s on tests may receive “meets standards,” as opposed to the highest grade of “expands standards,” using the new grading

<sup>52</sup> “Standards-Based Report Cards: FAQ for Parents.” Howell Township Public Schools. <http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/files/news/951/sbrc2012-qa.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> “Rubric for Grades One Through Four.” Howell Township Public Schools. [http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/files/news/951/sbrc2012-rubrics-grade1-4\\_r1.pdf](http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/files/news/951/sbrc2012-rubrics-grade1-4_r1.pdf)

rubric. The district emphasizes that simply achieving skill knowledge is not sufficient to earn the highest grade.<sup>54</sup>

The district is presently only implementing standards-based grading at the elementary level. Middle school students will receive regular letter grades, but will additionally be graded on a numerical scale for “initiative and behaviors that support learning.”<sup>55</sup> These include being on task, paying attention in class, participating, showing effort, completing assignments, and being prepared for class.<sup>56</sup>

In the FAQ document published for parents, the district addresses the following topics:<sup>57</sup>

- What is standards-based grade reporting?
- Why was the report card changed to the standards-based report card?
- What is the purpose of the standards-based report card?
- How does the standards-based report card compare to the traditional letter grade system?
- How can your child exceed the standards?
- How does this system of grading affect students when they move on to middle school?
- Why not have a standards-based system as an additional reporting component to the traditional report card?
- Won't the entire grade level receive the same grades, mostly 2s and 3s?
- My child has an IEP. How will he or she be assessed?
- Does this new system place more emphasis on daily interactions between teacher and student as opposed to standardized scores?
- How do you expect parents to explain to their children why they did not get a 4?

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<sup>54</sup> “Standards-Based Report Cards,” op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Rubric for Attribute Assessment.” Howell Township Schools.  
[http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/files/news/951/sbrc2012-rubrics-grade5-8\\_r1.pdf](http://www.howell.k12.nj.us/files/news/951/sbrc2012-rubrics-grade5-8_r1.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> “Standards-Based Report Cards: FAQ for Parents,” op. cit.

## BOULDER VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT (COLORADO)

In Colorado, statewide review processes conducted within the last 10 years revealed that standards-based educational practices were not being sufficiently adopted by school districts, despite state legislation which “began the era of standards-based education” in Colorado in the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> In 2007, after a year of collaboration between the Colorado Department of Education and several other school administration agencies, a guiding document was produced to help districts become more standards-based in their teaching and learning practices. This document advocates for the integration of learning standards into all aspects of learning, including the grading process. Specifically, it states that, “in standards-based schools, grades are replaced with, or are augmented by, achievement reports that indicate levels of performance on essential benchmarks.”<sup>59</sup> Because of the statewide movement toward standards-based education, a large number of districts across the state presently use standards-based grading systems.

Boulder Valley School District first implemented standards-based report cards in elementary schools in 2005, though planning for the switch began in 2001. The district created a task force to work in collaboration with pilot schools “in an intensive design process” which spanned four years. The district developed standards-based report cards in response to the statewide emphasis on standards-based education, as outlined above.<sup>60</sup> The implementation process roughly progressed along the following timeline:<sup>61</sup>

- Spring 2000: Curriculum councils provide feedback regarding the relationship between standards and grades.
- Spring 2001: Survey distributed to schools.
- December 2001: First meeting of Elementary Card Design Team; establish timeline for tasks.
- February - March 2002: Meet with curriculum councils for initial feedback on content of report card.
- March 2002: Review curriculum council feedback; design initial draft of the report card; send to members of curriculum councils for initial feedback.
- April 2002: Review curriculum council feedback on template; revise initial draft; send to all teachers for feedback; work with technology department to identify requirements of technology system.
- May 2002: Review teacher comments; revise draft; continue work with technology department to identify requirements of technology system.

<sup>58</sup> Benson, David. “The Standards-Based Teaching/Learning Cycle.” Colorado Department of Education. p. i.  
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/download/PDF/StandardsBasedTeachingLearningCyclepdf.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> “Standards Based Report Card.” Boulder Valley School District.  
<http://www.bvsd.org/reportcards/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>61</sup> Bullet points quoted verbatim from: “Implementation Archives.” Boulder Valley School District.  
<http://www.bvsd.org/reportcards/archives/Pages/default.aspx>

- June - September 2002: Begin working with curriculum councils to develop rubrics for standards and levels of performance; design training modules.
- August 2002: Identify pilot schools; schedule trainings with pilot schools; continue work with technology department.
- October 2002: Design feedback form for pilot schools; continue work with technology department.
- November 2002: Pilot schools use report card; pilot schools provide feedback.
- December 2002: Begin revisions; continue work with technology department.
- April 2003: Final recommendation regarding report card to curriculum coordinating council.
- August 2003: Training for all district teachers; continue work with technology department.
- November 2003: All district schools using a standards-based report card.

The district's grading scheme evaluates students on a four-point scale three times per year. A score of four indicates advanced achievement of a standard, three indicates proficiency, two indicates partial achievement, and one indicates that the student has not met a given standard. In addition to academic standards, the report cards evaluate students on the "characteristics of a successful learner," tracking whether they complete class assignments on time, produce quality work, learn independently, use time productively, and follow rules.<sup>62</sup>

The district explicitly lays out the content standards in the report cards and on the district website. On the website, parents can find informational resources available in English and Spanish. As opposed to offering a parent FAQ, the district publishes a document covering the "top five points for parents," which consists of the following statements:<sup>63</sup>

- Standards are statements that provide a clear description of what students should know and be able to do.
- Standards keep teaching focused and accountable for the academic performance of all students.
- Experienced teachers developed the report card format.
- Each trimester, parents will receive information about their child's overall growth, progress toward meeting standards, characteristics of successful learners, and interventions and extensions.

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<sup>62</sup> "Report Card – Kindergarten." Boulder Valley School District.  
<http://www.bvsd.org/reportcards/Documents/Kindergarten%20Report%20Card.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Reproduced with slight adaptation from: "The Top Five Points for Parents." Boulder Valley School District.  
<http://www.bvsd.org/reportcards/Documents/rcTopFivePoints.pdf>

- One parent information folder stays at home as a parent guide for major content taught throughout the year. A second folder will come home at the trimester to be signed and returned.

The document presents information similar to that which is commonly found in parent FAQ documents, though it lacks information on why the district uses standards-based grading or how to interpret students' grades. There is significantly more information on the district website aimed at teachers who have questions about standards-based grading, including a far more extensive FAQ.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Implementation FAQs." Boulder Valley School District. <http://www.bvsvd.org/reportcards/archives/Pages/faq.aspx>



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