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**English Department feedback for NCHS administration regarding departmental needs in Standards-Based Grading:**

The SBG initiative is now 7 years old and was begun as a means to secure Race to the Top Funding. That funding expired in 2016, at about the same time the high schools were tasked with implementing this initiative in earnest.

We had some great professional development in the early stages: Laura O'Donnell, Carmen Bergmann, and Dan Lamboley led impactful PDA courses on best practices in assessment, including proficiency scales; Nikki Maurer ran book studies about growth mindset and shifts in assessment practices; and the four core departments each had an assessment coach.

It was during that time that the English department converted all rubrics to proficiency scales aligned to the Marzano conversion scale and shored up instructional practices (for the most part) regarding late work, the use of zeroes, extra credit, and the role of homework as formative assessment.

If these are the foundational practices of Standards-Based Grading, departmentally, we were leading the way, especially among the core departments.

The problems have occurred in moving to the next step of recording and reporting scores on individual standards in a discipline whose standards are interdependent and recursive (and therefore, isolated reporting is almost counterproductive).

The weighting of individual standards and strands is just as "arbitrary" as any score in a traditional, points-based grade calculation and in many cases either falsely inflates or deflates the final grade to the point that it is not reflective of a student's learning, proficiency, or performance in the course. In response to this concern, teachers have been told by administration and consultants (Garnet Hillman) that, ultimately, the final grade can be adjusted to reflect what it needs to reflect (because at the end of a semester we are still converting back to a final grade, anyway).

Since this is the case, what is the rationale for moving to this final step of SBG which is the recording and reporting of individual standards?

Among colleagues in varying departments, there is debate about whether to calculate these final grades using the most recent scores (decaying weights), the most frequent scores (mode), or the average of scores in three tiers. Research indicates that in English and other Humanities-related fields, most frequent (mode) is what should be used. In other disciplines (math/science-related fields) most recent (decaying weights) is recommended, and as a district, we have settled on neither, instead going with a one-size-fits-all approach of averaging (within standards, within strands, and across roll-up scores). We are not doing what "experts" suggest is best practice, which is completely understandable because reporting individual standards and then converting them in a complex formula to a final grade is not foundational to SBG; it is an impractical last step that sounds great in theory but in practice has led to many unintended consequences.

In fact, Garnet Hillman's own district abandoned\* the reporting aspect of Standards-Based Grading once she became a full-time consultant/lecturer on the subject. That is not a failure of the system; it's an acknowledgment that one-size does not, in fact, fit all.

The angst, frustration, and confusion surrounding this transition has taken a toll on all stakeholders; students and parents are more confused, not less; teachers are spending more time on the tedious aspects of assessment, resulting in angst and frustration (see individual comments below); and administrators are bearing the brunt of an overall decline in morale of staff and stakeholders. And for what?

- We are not doing this because of the funding.
- We cannot honestly say this has improved the clarity in communication and understanding for students and families.
- We are not more consistent in grading practices because of this; consistency was increasing before this final shift.
- We are not reducing work-load for teachers by only focusing on the essentials (as Hillman suggested would happen); we have increased their workload at the expense of tending to the other (increasing) aspects of student-need.

Ultimately, a reasonable solution would be to make a distinction between:

standards-based learning:

a standards-aligned curriculum, the use of proficiency-scale rubrics on performance-based assessments, the elimination of formative assessment impacting a grade, the elimination of zeroes, and clear expectations around late work and reassessment.

and standards-based reporting:

the direct reporting of individual proficiency scores on individual standards.

All departments should be given the professional development and task force time to ensure that standards-based learning is in place in all courses. And those departments who have courses where standards-based reporting makes the most sense should be allowed and encouraged to do so because their professional judgment is fostered, respected, and supported. Those departments who decide that they can improve student learning and assessment practices by being standards-aligned but not report out individual standards should be similarly respected and supported (as we are doing with AP courses and Dual Credit courses).

If we cannot make this distinction and shift in the SBG initiative and must proceed on the path we are on, the rationale and support surrounding the standards-based-reporting aspect of standards-based grading is going to require a significant amount of clarification and support that we may not have the resources to address at the scale necessary to be effective and positively impactful for students.

#### **PD Feedback from the English Department:**

17% need more PD surrounding grades being based on clearly defined standards and learning goals.

17% need more PD surrounding feedback vs. assessment

33% need more PD surrounding district-defined proficiency levels/performance levels

33% need more PD surrounding the role of homework, late work, formative assessment, extra credit, and behaviors

42% need more PD surrounding product criteria vs. process criteria

58% need more PD surrounding reassessment and resubmission

67% need more PD surrounding Infinite Campus

#### **Additional comments from English teachers:**

We need time to discuss how we can keep the depth of evaluation options and opportunities that our huge number of standards provides, without being overwhelming to students, parents, and quite frankly, teachers as well. Making difficult decisions on what to keep, merge, and delete is a time-consuming process that requires everyone to be on the same page and to have a voice, and we'll need a time and place to do that work, ideally before next school year. I know no one who wants to deal with this mess and keep the status quo again next year.

I think the mindset and idea behind SBG are sound and logical. Its implementation has been a bit rocky- I am concerned by the different uses of SBG in different classes and departments as I think that students/families are already confused as is. I think an overall explanation with the entire school would be helpful especially after adding the 2.5.

I agree with standards, rubrics, retakes, and that a product should be the way to assess a skill. However, the whole behaviors don't affect your grade is still hard for me. Also, I think the moment we change scores to grades we alter the very purpose of SBG. And IC and I are not friends.

I do not understand the mystery surrounding how to earn a 4 nor the rarity; what exactly is going above and beyond: I would despise this ambiguity as a student. I also have trouble with why there isn't 3.5, 2.5. I don't think anyone has considered how difficult it is to track which student simply didn't choose to assess and which students need reteaching and reassessing, as opposed to students who see an opportunity to take advantage of a system that is broken. And is reteaching occurring now when we reassess (as opposed to pre-sbg hysteria) or are we just calling it that? Aren't many of us expecting or hoping that they kids figure it out on their own?

Further, didn't we always reteach when a student was absent or when a student didn't understand? Did we somehow decide that students are now mature enough (have the self-discipline) to do homework even if it's not being evaluated with a grade? Has human nature now changed: do we not respond well to rewards? Historically, new grading systems, new pedagogical approaches, new methods, and new untested initiatives have one result: turmoil because it is indeed a passive-aggressive assault suggesting that a teacher doesn't accurately measure learning. How many times can educators have their professionalism questioned until we no longer can come in and do a job that we are paid too little to do, with too little resources, and too little time? Students- like teachers- are human, and are passionate (students with their future- teachers their craft). The continued onslaught of initiatives threatens to steal what is still good about school. SBG is like Communism. In theory, there is a hell of a lot of good; in practice not so much.

Right now, I do not understand SBG and believe that the district hasn't adequately prepared teachers to best help and assess students.

Kids do not read the rubrics for feedback; they find the rubrics confusing and cumbersome. I feel like I am doing double the work now with providing written feedback, having meetings with students, filling out rubrics, and entering tons of lines of standards into infinite campus. Our class sizes are not conducive to effectively and accurately incorporating standards-based grading, and the majority of students are not using the opportunity to grow & improve by revising work any more now than they were when using a points-based system. Too much of my time is being spent grading vs creating engaging lessons. Almost all of the philosophies of standards-based grading can be integrated into a points-based system. Standards-based grading has helped me look at and create meaningful assessments. I have incorporated standards-based philosophies into my junior class that uses points & have found improvement in the way that I report grades, scaffold skills, and create assessments.

The principles of SBG may have validity, but transitioning proficiency scores into letter grades is too problematic. It creates frustration and reduces motivation for students as the grades do not truly reflect their ability levels. The creation of clear rubrics with descriptions of achievement levels has been a positive outcome of SBG. However, the rubrics should be used for the sole purpose of giving feedback to learners. Putting all of the skills into a grading platform overwhelms and disengages parents, leading to less communication--not the goal of improved communication that SBG promised. If the district would simply survey teachers who have children in the district, they would find this to be true. Even parents who are educators are now paying less attention to scores that are entered because the data has become overwhelming and meaningless--even to educators. Teachers should use rubrics organized around achievement or proficiency levels but then be allowed to convert those using scales (similar to the Marzano scale) and to report a percentage or point score as before.

Truthfully, I had a hard time answering some of the questions on professional development on this survey, because I'm not sure that all of my concerns with SBG can be fixed through professional development. For example, I think the district rushing to implement SBG, and then making changes midway through a semester (which further confuses students and parents) has been troubling. It is also problematic that teachers have had to devote a great deal of time explaining SBG and grade calculations to students and parents- even when we have been unsure of grade calculations ourselves. Additionally, although I respect that one of the goals of SBG was to get rid of discrepancies in grading, the lack of autonomy means some subjects and teachers are having to adopt practices that are not logical or best suited for a course.

One of the practices that I am particularly concerned about is accepting late work and reassessments. I would like to preface my sharing of this concern with the fact that I absolutely want to help students grow, and I am not advocating for any teachers to have overly strict policies that ignore extenuating circumstances or disregard the fact that some students may need more time to complete tasks than others. The situations I am referring to are focused on students who consistently do not use class time to complete work even after a teacher has attempted to redirect him/her, want to turn in work far past deadlines even after given more than enough time to complete an assignment, or want to reassess after making little to no effort on an original assessment.

It seems as though many individuals (both students and staff) have the impression that the effort to remove behavior from grades equates to teachers needing to embrace accepting late work and reassessments, regardless of whether or not a student used class time and/or made any attempt to complete an assignment, learn a skill, etc. In my experience, this mentality is contributing to students taking work less seriously- and see due dates as a mere suggestion. I am certainly not saying that grades should be used as punishment; however, allowing students to turn in work essentially whenever they feel like it does not instill work ethic or time management skills- and I am seeing a lack of these in my students now more than ever. In the process of focusing solely on subject related standards, we are forsaking general life skills that students will need regardless of what profession they enter. For instance, a student entering the trades may never need to analyze a theme or identify literary devices in his/her postsecondary endeavors, but they most likely will need to understand deadlines, responsibility, and time management. If it is true that most late work should be accepted without question, then it seems as though the focus of education is no longer on creating productive citizens. Grant it, we can include a check or minus on learner characteristics at the end of the semester- but students know this is not part of their actual grade and does not appear on their transcript, so they do not care about these checks or minuses.

In my classes, due dates are not arbitrary. I create deadlines primarily for one of two reasons: (1) The assignment students need to complete is a stepping stone in a larger process/goal (and therefore needs to be done in order to move forward with their growth). (2) The nature of English courses typically requires that teachers devote large amounts of time to grading in order to accurately assess students' work and provide meaningful feedback to help them learn; therefore, deadlines are needed to allow me to be able to grade the work in a timely fashion. The time commitment is so great that it regularly requires that teachers complete grading outside of our contractual work hours, and I often schedule things in my personal life around when I am getting papers in. The expectation that teachers should accept late work in addition to allowing reassessments does not acknowledge or respect that teachers have commitments beyond grading- in both their professional and personal lives. Grant it, the majority of us have created a process for students to be allowed to reassess- but this often does not cut down on the amount of time teachers devote to creating, grading, and entering reassessments. This time takes away time from conferencing with students, creating innovative lessons, and addressing students' mental and emotional well-being. When students choose not to complete something on time (and there are no significant extenuating circumstances that contribute to the work being late), or want to reassess something after not completing the assignment to begin with, teachers who have set aside evenings and weekends to grade are forced to yet again create more time. This is problematic not only in that students are not learning to be accountable for their choices, but I believe it will contribute to teacher burnout and generally poor morale. Teachers often feel under-respected and undervalued in our society as is, and the notion that we need to accept work late even from students who make no attempt to complete it during class further degrades us as professionals. This is not to say that we don't care about our students or want them to grow- but at the end of the day, teachers need to be able to devote time to tasks other than assessment.

If we truly want what is best for students, I think teachers will be able to better serve their needs by continuing to be allowed to have policies concerning deadlines. If staff and students are currently misunderstanding or misinterpreting this aspect of the district's shift to SBG, I believe it would be extremely beneficial for there to be more communication on this topic. Teachers need to know that our administrators will respect us and will back/support us when reasonable deadlines and cutoffs are implemented. Although I do not want to speak for my colleagues, it seems as though some of us have been given the distinct impression that this is not the case. I am also not saying late work should never be accepted, but are teachers trusted, as professionals, to make fair and logical determinations?

*\*Deerfield middle schools are not fully implemented, and Lockport last update their sbg website in 2017, but their course description book for this year makes no reference to standards-based grading and explicitly states that grades will be on an A, B, C, D, F reporting system.*