# "It's Just Not Fair!" Making Sense of Secondary Students' Resistance to a Standards-Based Grading

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Variations of the question, "How are you doing in school?" are among those most frequently posed by adults to students (Reeves, 2004). Grades represent the primary source of that information; indeed, Olson (1995) called grades "one of the most sacred traditions in American education" (p. 24). There is so much trust in the messages conveyed by grades that they have gone without challenge and are resistant to change (Marzano, 2000). Yet reporting only a single mark for each subject may be insufficient to answer meaningful questions about student progress (Guskey, 2001). Bailey and McTighe (1996) noted that when clear responses to these questions are not available, grading's other purposes cannot be effectively carried out.

Marzano (2000) has pointed out that the current grading system in America is over a century old and lacks a body of supporting research. He also noted problems such as the arbitrary weighting of assessments and merging of diverse knowledge and skills into single assessment scores. Reeves (2004) noted that grading systems may change drastically from one classroom to another, because grades serve multiple purposes and are unique to each course or teacher.

Students are entitled to accurate and timely feedback on their strengths and deficiencies and about actions that can be taken to achieve learning

goals. Hattie (2008), in a review of studies on learning, reported that providing students with specific information about their standing in terms of particular objectives significantly increased achievement. Unfortunately, students' awareness of their standing is often made difficult by inaccurate and inconsistent messages about what a particular letter grade means.

Concerns over the number of graduates unprepared for the rigors of university and careers, as well as the gap between American students and those in other countries, have led 46 states in the U.S. to adopt the Common Core State Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015), a set of learning targets designed to drive quality instruction (Spencer, 2012). Thus, it is critical that teachers link grading and reporting to standards (Munoz & Guskey, 2015).

Comprehensive standards-based grading systems (SBG), which report what students know and can do relative to standards, purport to facilitate clearer, more targeted feedback compared to traditional letter grades. This is accomplished by such practices as reporting academic achievement separate from behaviors, tying assessment and grading exclusively to standards, prioritizing the most recent evidence of learning, and allowing for editing and resubmission of work (Swan, Guskey, & Jung, 2014). SBG principles also favor median versus mean scores, proficiency-based rubrics versus percentages, and a balance of quality formative and summative assessments (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005; Munoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2010; Reeves, 2004).

O'Connor (2010) identified strategies that are increasingly being used:

- Incorporating more formative work that is not included in final grades.

- Updating grades frequently. Since learning is a continuous process, the quality of learning should take precedence over when it occurs.

- Thoroughly discussing assessment and grading with students, since a primary objective of education is to have students become self-evaluating.

Although a body of scholarship explores issues pertaining to standards-based grading, there is a dearth of research addressing student perspectives. The purpose of this study, then, was to gain a more thorough understanding of the attitudes, understanding, and experiences of students impacted for the first time by an SBG initiative at their high school. At the beginning and end of an academic year, students shared their perspectives on issues such as the pace of SBG implementation and change, fairness of grading processes, motivation, preparation for college, inconsistencies between courses, the role of homework, and communication with teachers.

# Review of the Literature

A number of writers (Bostic, 2012; Deddeh, Main, & Fulkerson, 2010; Lamarino, 2014; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014) have examined standards-based grading as a way of more accurately reporting student learning in both secondary and post-secondary settings. Pollio and Hochbein (2015) concluded that standards-based math grades were a stronger predictor of performance on a high school state assessment than traditional grading practices. Several dissertations have also reported correlations between standards-based grading in high schools and improved scores on high-stakes assessments (e.g. Haptonstall, 2010; Ricketts, 2010; Rosales, 2013).

At the post-secondary level, Peters, Buckmiller, and Kruse (2017) found that, although students were initially anxious about the paradigm shift and additional work that SBG would entail, they nonetheless viewed the model as clearer and more fair. Students also reported moving beyond "playing the game" of earning points for a grade and engaging more substantively with course content. Based on regular formative feedback, students began to take more ownership of their learning. Ultimately, most participants found SBG more beneficial, defensible, and reflective of their knowledge than traditional grading practices, yet SBG approaches at the secondary level continue to meet resistance.

## Obstacles to SBG Implementation

Among the most problematic areas identified in the SBG literature are a lack of understanding and/or support by community members (Guskey & Jung, 2013; Marzano, 2000; Spencer, 2012). In districts where SBG has been adopted, small but vocal groups often go to great lengths to contest its implementation (Dexter, 2015; Yost, 2015). Perhaps the largest concern expressed by parents at the secondary level is the perceived threat SBG initiatives might pose to their children's post-secondary opportunities (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). The aversion also appears to relate to long-standing familiarity with traditional grading and reporting that is based on A-F letter grades as well as awareness of the need to adapt American traditions such as honor rolls, athletic eligibility requirements, and the selecting of valedictorians.

Peters and Buckmiller (2014) found that even after a school or district has made the decision to adopt standards-based grading, there is still a plethora of obstacles to successful and systemic implementation. Schools altering their grading systems must deal with stakeholders' prior beliefs, perceptions, and practices with regard to grading, which can result in a predictable implementation dip due to resistance and lack of compliance (Clough & Kruse, 2010). Further, schools may become sidetracked with details before addressing essential questions related to assessment and learning (Brookhart, 2011b).

## Implementation Theories

Institutional theory addresses the manner in which new structures, such as SBG, become established guidelines for behavior, and it provides a context to describe gaps between preferred and actual processes (Scott, 2004, p. 2). The related theory of *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) explores pressures causing one unit in an environment to resemble another. The *type* of isomorphic pressure can impact the likelihood of successful adaptation. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested that coercive pressures result in performance compliance rather than a culture of performance. In contrast, mimetic approaches encourage more choice and predict greater potential for positive outcomes (Cyert & March, 1963).

Relative to this study, there are few accounts of factors that impact the efficacy of standards-based grading initiatives during implementation. A lack of awareness of the series of decisions and actions that are involved can open schools to a greater risk of failure in reform efforts. Moreover, because their mission to effect student learning is challenged by limited time and resources, it is essential that schools make decisions that are informed by theory and grounded in defensible practice.

## Student Voice and Engagement

As asserted by Mitra (2008), students should have meaningful input in efforts to reform schools. If the intent is to improve student learning, it defies logic to ignore those most directly affected by grading and assessment decisions; yet students are seldom involved in such discussions. The literature that examines the most effective means to engage students points to practices that encourage student voice (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008) by giving young people opportunities to share opinions about school problems and actively collaborating with them to address significant educational issues (Mitra, 2004). Research demonstrates that such efforts can empower students, improve student-teacher relationships, and foster growth in belonging, self-worth and competence (Cushman, 2000; Kincheloe, 2007; Mitra, 2004). Further, Meltzer and Hamann (2004) have noted that, in order to motivate students, schools must establish responsive environments where students are acknowledged and have a voice.

Historically, when adults think of students, they view students as beneficiaries of a process of school change but rarely as participants (Fullan, 2007). As a student once commented to Fletcher (2003), "No one ever asks us our opinion. The truth is, we have the most to lose when our schools aren't working right, and the most to gain when they are." "Why," asked Bowles and Gintis (1976, pp. 250-251) "in a democratic society, should an individual's first real contact with a formal institution be so profoundly antidemocratic?" Reversing this trend by partnering with students in school-wide learning communities helps close gaps in gender, class, and race, creates support-

ive learning environments, promotes lifelong learning through civic engage-ment, and makes learning relevant in the school setting (Fletcher, 2003). The primary research question guiding this study was, therefore, "What concerns and struggles do students have regarding standards-based grading?"

## Research Methods

This study made use of existing data that a collaborating school district col-lected during the 2012-2013 academic year. A school that was involved in an earlier study of schools that were aligning assessment and grading to standards, (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014) offered to share student survey data regarding SBG. This site had not only established the longest-running model of standards-based grading in the region, but was also the only one to have consistently gathered student feedback data.

## Study Context

Data from this study were collected from students at Sojourn High School (a pseudonym), a modern, well-equipped 9-12 building with nearly 500 students. Located in a town of just over 2000 residents, and within 15 miles of one of the state's public universities, Sojourn had a predominantly White, economically advantaged student body that matriculated in large numbers at post-secondary institutions. In any given year, less than 10% of its student population qualified for free or reduced lunch, a common indica-tor of poverty.

Wayne Hopkins (pseudonym), the principal, led the high school after having spent much of his career at the primary level. His background was in-fluential, because standards-based grading (SBG) tended to be more widely practiced in the early grades in this state. Hopkins' understanding of SBG, along with meaningful professional discussion and practice on the part of key faculty members at Sojourn, led to "the stars being aligned" for an SBG initiative, and a national education magazine had recently recognized the school district's grading reform efforts

A faculty-led book study and an increasing number of teachers exper-imenting with SBG initiated a larger conversation, and the district subse-quently moved to formalize SBG throughout its only high school. The deci-sion was prompted, in part, by awareness of the fairness and consistency issues that were raised by the school's faculty using two entirely different grading systems. The formalized guidelines, which were developed based on SBG literature (Guskey, 2001; Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2010; Reeves, 2004), included the following expectations:

1.  Entries in the grade book that count towards the final grade will be limited to course or grade level standards.

2.  Extra credit will not be given at any time.

3.  Students will be allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding of classroom standards in various ways. Retakes and revisions will be allowed.

4.  Teachers will determine grade book entries by considering multiple points of data (emphasizing the most recent) and provide evidence to support this determination.

5.  Students will be given multiple opportunities to practice standards independently through homework or class work, with regular feedback. Practice assignments, including homework, will not be included as part of the final grade.

The school leadership team was intentional in its approach to helping the community understand SBG. District officials hosted multiple information sessions and an SBG conference attended by teachers and administrators from across the state. In spite of these efforts there was still disconnect for some parents and students.

## Data Collection and Analysis

School District officials had collected both quantitative data in the form of Likert-style numbered responses to specific questions, and qualitative data from open-ended questions such as "What are the biggest advantages and disadvantages to SBG?" and "What would you most like to change about SBG?" Because of concerns related to the validity and reliability of the quantitative methods, the qualitative data served as the primary source for this study. Specifically, the following qualitative prompts generated the data used in this study:

•   What do you see as the biggest weakness/disadvantage of standards-based grading?

•   What do you see as the next biggest weakness/disadvantage of standards-based grading?

•   If I could change one thing about standards-based grading, it would be...

We focused on these prompts because the study sought to understand student resistance to SBG. We are unaware of any other studies that specifically seek to give voice to student resistance to SBG. At the time of this study, Sojourn High School reported an enrollment of 478 students in grades 9-12. All the students had been asked to share their anonymous comments regarding SBG near the beginning of the academic year, and again toward its end. The fall comments included responses from 376 students, and the spring comments came from 230 students. This process generated over 500

different critical student statements about standards-based grading. Because data were collected at multiple time points and collected anonymously, we cannot know, with certainty, which statements might overlap.

Although we noted ways students valued SBG, the nature of the research question meant that our analysis highlighted students' critical comments regarding SBG. There was, we believed, a justifiable context for focusing on their concerns and challenges. Based on our prior research, and despite a plethora of research supporting SBG, we were aware of significant obstacles to implementation and strong negative sentiments in this particular community. Given this, and anecdotal evidence from local sources that students' initial attitudes toward SBG were in alignment with those of their parents and the community, we believed that there was more to learn from understanding student concerns and exploring the underlying reasons behind these concerns.

Student comments were initially analyzed using descriptive coding to summarize student perspectives and in vivo coding to give voice to students using their own words (Saldana, 2012). Following this exploratory coding, categories were developed using a code mapping strategy in which codes were grouped into common ideas and finally, themes were generated to develop more inferential ideas by focusing on the most common recurring ideas across the data. Initial analysis was carried out by one of the authors who is not affiliated with the school district with discussion among authors to confirm interpretations. After the initial analysis, a second author, also not affiliated with the school district, reviewed the analysis and supporting data in order to confirm that interpretations and identified themes were appropriate. Finally, the remaining authors reviewed the analysis, including one author who is an administrator within the school district.

# Findings

Data analysis resulted in five themes that emerged from the coding process as the most prevalent among those identified. These themes indicated that students were most concerned with (a) the SBG implementation process, (b) grading issues, (c) preparation for university and future employment, (d) social issues, and (e) issues related to current teaching, learning, and motivation. Themes and subthemes are explored in the narrative of student quotes that are best represented, or are best articulated. Those most commonly shared have been used when appropriate to illustrate themes; these will help provide depth and give more detailed insight into students' concerns with SBG in the school studied.

Many of the students' typed responses contain spelling/grammatical errors; these have been left in, but the notation "(sic)" was not inserted so as to minimize disruption to the reader. As noted in the research methods section, these themes were developed from more than 500 student state-

ments resulting from questions that asked the students to critique or make recommendations about SBG. However, we have not attempted to quantify themes because the goal of this research was to describe and provide deeper insight into the nature of student resistance rather than to quantify its extent. That said, themes were only reported if they were consistently observed in the data.

## Implementation Concerns

Student responses in this realm seemed most concerned with inconsistencies across courses and departments.  Many students noted general inconsistencies such as: "Some teachers do not implement the rules;" "not everyone communicates the same;" "not consistent with all classes;" and "no standardization." Another student said, "I don't like that some teachers do it sometimes, others all the time, and some don't do it at all."

A particular inconsistency that was noted pertained to the timeline for reassessment. One student observed, "We have a time limit…so obviously the communication to the teachers isn't quite working there," while another noted, "The teachers don't let you reassess until a certain date [near] the end of the quarter." Clearly, these students perceived inconsistencies in when teachers were allowing reassessment to occur.

Students also noticed inconsistencies in the expectations for reassessment, with variance in how to qualify for reassessment and how many were allowed. A few did not like teachers "dictating when you can reassess and how many chances you get." A student remarked on reassessment being "a really long process that takes too much time;" another raised concerns about "conflicting and confusing" reassessment schedules.

In some cases, students blamed inconsistencies on teacher opposition, noting, "Some teachers seem to [purposely] make it hard to reassess." One elaborated that some teachers were against SBG while others simply did not yet understand it.  He wrote, "Not all teachers are on board and it makes it hard for the students when they know that," while a peer commented, "Not every teacher understands how it works, and [so they fail to] do it the same way." One frustrated respondent exclaimed, "My God, only a relative few teachers know what to do, and this system is just being pushed along."

Students made several recommendations for addressing these implementation issues,. Some "would make it more consistent. It's all over the place from class to class."  One suggested that teachers with limited SBG proficiency should be able to opt out. Another echoed, "I wouldn't make all teachers do it. Not all know how to use the system properly; some just grade things normally and convert them to standards, which is detrimental to your grade." Another student differed, noting: "This year is a great improvement from last year, there are just a few teachers who need to fully grasp the concept and be on board with the idea of reassessing and that some people learn

a little later than others." Other students made general recommendations such as that there be "more communication between the teachers as to when reassessment times are, because there can be a significant overlap between classes." Another was more specific:

> I would have all the departments…get together and plan everything out so [they] don't have to keep changing things throughout the year. Also there should be more built in reassessments [and] if on a test a student does better or worse on a certain standard that grade should replace/influence the old one…I love the idea of [SBG] but I don't think all of its rules have been implemented properly.

## Concern for Grades

Not surprisingly, students were worried about the impact of SBG on their grades. Some recognized increased difficulty in maintaining high grades by relating that it was "harder to get an A," that "a lot more people are failing," and that there are "lower GPAs" as a result. The way in which standards were translated to grades was also of concern. Some made comments such as, "I don't like that we only use a four point scale," while others gave suggestions to address their concerns. One student wrote, "If the scale is that small [4-points], every standard should just be pass-fail." Others wanted to change the way in which points were used to represent standards. While some preferred a move to a 6 or 7-point scale, others wanted "to be on a scale of 10 [so that] all of the in between grades are specified." Others suggested fine-tuning the existing 4-point system: "I feel it should be 1, 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5, and 4, so that way there [are] more ways to pass."

Many students disparaged the fact that homework was not being counted by listing some variation of "homework not counting toward final grade" as a problem. Many shared the complaint that, "[We are] doing the work and should get credit for it." They recognized the "cushion" that homework provided, that "there are [so few] points available on quizzes and tests," or that "fewer things to grade make each one more heavily weighted." Some supported their reasoning "that homework is part of the grade" by noting, "Tests aren't a solid indicator of knowledge because of different factors that could occur on the day you take it," or that "Some people aren't good test takers." One forthcoming student noted that having homework count is "a way to get our grade up."

Other students lamented the replacement of scores if the new score was lower than previous scores, clearly not enamored with the notion that their scores could go down as the result of a reassessment. For example, one wrote that, with a reassessment grade "it is replaced even though it's worse." Another student claimed, "It doesn't fully show how well you are doing, because the most recent grades count rather than the best."

## Future Preparation Concerns

Grades represent somewhat immediate concerns, however, some students expressed concern with the impact of SBG on their long-term goals. Students shared fears that the SBG system is "not preparing [us] for college." One wrote, "Colleges don't have this . . . so it's setting us up for failure. The [idea] that I don't need to study because I can retake—too bad we can't retake in college!" One reiterated this concept by stating:

> The proficient 3 isn't good enough for colleges. They don't care what kind of grading we have; they just look at the grade . . . I thought high school was supposed to prepare you for college, but with standards base grading, it's not. I am taking college classes right now, and my high school classes are nothing like it. You have to have a lot more responsibility which is not being taught at the high school, where you're allowed to turn things in late and re-do assignments.

To remedy the college and life preparation issue, some students believed "grading should be modeled after how universities run their classes." Other students believed "there should be a limit to how many times a student can reassess" because "it teaches a student that in life you get do overs, but really we don't."

## Social Issues

Social concerns were less prevalent but yielded interesting perspectives. Students noted that "people whining [about SBG] bothers me," or that "other students complain about it too much." Another student shared this sentiment, noting, "Several of my fellow students fail to care about their grade. They are the ones who normally complain about standards-based grading because they blame the system for doing [poorly]." Other students recognized how "some people abuse the ability to reassess."

Some students emphasized "feeling stressed" when raising concerns about SBG. One student cited a busy schedule, writing: "As it is, I have virtually no free-time at home, and even then it's almost impossible to study for all your classes." This stress manifested in a student's claim that SBG had "ruined [his] self-esteem, and another's recognition of a snowball effect: "There's so much stress I start to drop off in one of my classes and then others turn into horrible grades." One student provided a different view of how SBG creates a social stress for some students:

> SBG works well, but not for everyone. When you reassess, you appear stupid for getting an undesirable score. What if [your] social status is based on intelligence and you screw something up? [We] can't reassess if we want to have friends. We have to endure all of the hardships of SBG and none of the advantages!

## Teaching, Learning, and Motivation

Some students' comments addressed issues of teaching and learning, revolving around the issue of motivation. For example, a student attributed SBG to "a feigned interest in learning." Others pointed to decreased motivation, based on the thinking that "I can just reassess later." One wrote, "It's easy to slack off on the first attempt since you know you'll get a chance to reassess." Some students didn't "feel a need" or were "unmotivated" to do homework, thus "not getting enough practice before assessments."

Although many students noted increased clarity in expectations as a strength of SBG, others made statements such as, "I don't necessarily know what I need to do to get better," or "I want to reassess, but I don't know *what* to reassess." One student reiterated this lack of clarity, noting, "I think part of the challenge is recognizing what it is exactly you need to be grasping."

## Synthesis of Themes

In some cases, students drew from multiple themes for their critique of SBG. These student comments show how the themes overlap and how concerns are interrelated. For example, one student noted issues with implementation, grade concerns, and social issues such as the busy nature of their lives:

> In some classes reassessment isn't available until the end of the quarter. It's only available for a small period of time, and that makes it very difficult to work to improve your grade if you have a busy schedule like many students do.

Another demonstrated her concern with implementation, grades, self-esteem, and learning concerns:

> I've never done so poorly in school. I do my homework/practice and work hard. It's not fair that [practice assignments] don't count. And there should be extra credit! Reassessing is nice but I have an extremely busy schedule. There shouldn't be a time limit; [it should] be more available and accessible! SBG has made me confused and [unable to] understand…what I'm doing in some classes. It's ruined my self-esteem because missing a point or two [affects] my overall grade.

These responses serve as a window to students' views in the midst of an initiative that was adopted in response to a broader educational transition to standards-based learning. It is to the school's credit that it has committed to incorporating student voice in this initiative. The findings and their potential implications of the findings will be addressed in the next section, with the intent to facilitate a broader discussion of the student perspectives within the context of best educational practice and the conditions most likely to increase student agency and ownership of learning.

# Implications/Discussion

The comments, many written articulately and with passion, evinced the conflict felt by a cohort of students in the midst of a paradigmatic educational change. The sentiments that were expressed ranged from anger and frustration to acceptance and even appreciation, and they demonstrate changes in awareness and understanding over time. Students' defense of, and advocacy for, particular grading practices should be considered with respect and an open mind, however, they must also be taken within the context of past experiences and analyzed through the lens of what is known about effective assessment, grading, and reporting. From these findings, districts may be in a more advantageous position to plan for and address the concerns of all stakeholders when engaging in reform efforts. Of course, it should be noted that the application of such findings might be dependent on the extent to which their settings are similar to those of the district studied here.

Despite the student criticisms of SBG, there is nevertheless reason for optimism about future receptivity and dissemination of such initiatives. Indeed, there is much to be learned from the students' critical perspectives. It should be noted that a near-plurality of students reported dissatisfaction with at least some of the grading and reporting practices being implemented, and any serious inquiry of student voice must seek to understand such concerns. If our purpose in grading is the improvement of learning and teaching, then, according to Reeves (2004), we have a responsibility to provide information that is "accurate, meaningful, and relevant to student improvement" (p. 23). When standards are used effectively as a guide for student grades, students should readily be able to answer the questions, "What does my grade mean?" and "How can I do better next time?" To help facilitate such an eventuality, we discuss the following conclusions and implications:

### Students' perception of inconsistencies in SBG implementation may suggest that teachers require greater clarity and/or buy in.

One of the administrators at Sojourn mused, "I think it's a fundamental problem in our education system that teachers, myself included, were never taught about fairness of grading. You set up the grade book you want, without any conversation about how important that is or what you're really doing. It's just your personal, arbitrary evaluation of the kids." Reeves (2004) echoed this, noting fairness should be a transcendent value, the basis on which all educational decisions are made. He questioned the fairness of any system that subjects students to mysterious, changing expectations. Although one of the objectives of standards-based systems is to replace such arbitrary practices, and, to be sure, there are many teachers at Sojourn well versed in the process, who share common grading practices, there must be a growth curve for others, as with any new learning.

To overcome student concerns and teacher reticence in this regard, it seems that potential for progress exists in the general area of consistency; specifically, habits of practice, understanding assessment principles, and terminology. But, as Brookhart (2011a) asserted, getting sidetracked with details or policies before addressing basic questions of what a grade means may be problematic; the first priority is to examine beliefs about what reform should accomplish. A core element of Sojourn teachers have undertaken this level of rigorous work and professional dialogue, however, SBG was only recently formalized throughout the school, and there were likely relative novices who needed targeted coaching and additional professional development in the new grading paradigm. Meanwhile, care must be taken to ensure the use of common language, vocabulary, and comprehension of principles. Powell and Colyvas (2008) advocated for this as a critical aspect of sustaining innovative processes. As people use protocols to achieve mutual understanding; only then do they become codified into formal performance measures, the metrics by which both students and teachers are evaluated.

Although some of the remaining inconsistencies noted by students are, no doubt, due to the need for further growth in development and understanding relative to SBG on the part of students and teachers alike, another possible impediment is worth addressing. Many teachers, particularly at the secondary level, see grades as a means of control or coercion (Glasser, 1998) or as a way to select or differentiate students rather than as an exercise in professional judgment to enhance learning. However, as Guskey (2011) points out, no research supports the idea that low grades prompt students to try harder. Quite the contrary, they often prompt students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many students begin to view low grades as irrelevant or meaningless; others blame themselves for their low grades but feel helpless to improve.

With regard to the belief that grades should provide a basis for differentiating students, Guskey, Jung and Swan (2011) pose a basic philosophical question for teachers: Is the purpose of assessment and grading to select talent or develop it? If it is indeed to develop it, then it entails a different approach to our work. First, we should clarify as thoroughly as possible what students should learn and be able to do (the purpose of Common Core standards and 21st Century Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration), then try everything possible, using best practices in instruction, assessment and grading, to ensure that all students learn those things well.

**Helping students to improve their dispositions about, and understanding of, learning may alleviate some of their concerns.**

Kruse and Wilcox (2009) found many students resisted research-based teaching strategies and that resistance seemed to be tied to students' misconceptions about learning and teaching. For example, students in 9th grade science classes studied believed learning to be recall of facts that the teacher's job

is to simply tell students right answers, that learning is linear and straightforward, and that only "right" answers have value. Such misconceptions about the process of learning unsurprisingly interfere with students' acceptance of research-based teaching strategies.

Our findings reinforce Kruse and Wilcox's (2009) notion that students' views about learning may impact their views toward innovative educational strategies. That is, the significant gaps in many students' comprehension of the role of assessment in learning seem to impact their view of assessment practices. Indeed, two of the biggest "weaknesses" reported about SBG by students were the policies on not counting homework points toward the final grade and failing to offer extra credit. Such critiques illustrate possible misconceptions students have about learning and assessment. One insightful student encapsulated a common sentiment when he wrote, "Students need to learn how learning works." Yet, students may need help in adjusting their views toward learning, in particular, from a fixed to a growth mode, to alleviate this deficiency.

Fortunately, student views on learning can be changed with intentionality on the part of educators. Wilcox, Kruse, and Herman (2013) found "students' epistemological beliefs can change through reforms-based instruction that explicitly addresses learning and thinking" (p. 21). However, students' views do not change through simple exposure to such practices. Instead, Wilcox et al. (2013), noted that a control group of students who experienced research-based practices but were not asked to explicitly reflect about learning did not improve their views about learning. Even though the extent to which improved understanding of learning results in decreased resistance is still uncertain, improving students' views of learning is well worth the effort, as the way they view knowledge and learning impacts their ability to learn (Chen & Pajares, 2010; Jehng, Jihn-Chang, Johnson, & Anderson, 1993; Schommer, 1990; Songer & Linn, 1991).

The resistance to change found in this study ought not to be surprising. As suggested by Guskey and Jung (2009), changing how students are graded challenges what they associate with "real school." When making changes of this magnitude, it is incumbent on schools to send a concerted message with "strong logic for the new system along with a thorough accounting of the inadequacies of the old system" (p. 2).

Students need time, understanding, and explicit coaching to internalize the "new" reality that the primary function of grading is to describe how well they have achieved specific learning targets based on evidence gathered from assignments, assessments, or other demonstrations of learning, as well as to provide clear information about their progress and feedback to guide improvements where necessary (Guskey & Jung, 2009). This raises the need for future inquiry into how students conceptualize change over time in the wake of exposure to SBG principles. This concept is a paradigm shift for nearly everyone who has gone to school, as it challenges the traditional

practice of giving equal weight to every assignment in a grading period, regardless of whether it was submitted at the beginning or end of the learning process. However, logic suggests the most current information is likely to offer the most accurate depiction of how well a student has learned something. The students in our study affirm, Guskey's (2001) assertion that, if past assessment no longer reflects students' level of learning, it must be replaced by new information; otherwise learning is misrepresented.

### Student comments may reflect misconceptions about college and adult life.

Many students shared the perspective of one of their classmates, who wrote: "I don't like the fact that we're one of the few schools doing [SBG]; we have a disadvantage when it comes into getting into college." Sojourn's principal related a widespread belief that students would be at a disadvantage when it came to college admissions and scholarships: "I don't fault [them] for that. But they're so consumed with [earning a high GPA], they don't care how they get it. I always tell them: 'You'll get into college, but that's not why we're here; we're here to make sure you get *through* college.'"

Such concerns pushed Hopkins to begin conversing with admissions personnel, who acknowledged GPA and class rank were not always reliable indicators of collegiate success. When Hopkins asked about the best way to communicate their students' performance to post-secondary institutions, the director responded, "I think most would be interested in knowing that you have removed the variables that inflate grades. We trust that grades from your high school accurately represent learning." Even with this vote of confidence, Sojourn has begun to compare grade distributions from before and after adoption of SBG, which should provide valuable information for future discussions.

Other elements in the student survey data demonstrated a desire for Sojourn's teachers to "do things the way colleges do things." This, too, demonstrates a disconnect between students' perceptions of college life and what actually transpires. For instance, students frequently mentioned a desire for homework to count, yet neglected to recognize that many college courses give no credit for homework. One of Sojourn's administrators wryly suggested that parents and students would be less than pleased if "we started holding our survey classes with 300 students in a lecture hall." Further, some university professors are moving toward standards-based grading practices (e.g. Beatty, 2013; Kruse & Wilcox, 2012). Indeed, three of the authors of this study are professors who have transitioned to SBG practices in their undergraduate and graduate courses [a fact that, in full disclosure, it should be noted might have resulted in some implicit bias].

One of the more complex issues that emerged from surveys pertained to the policy of allowing students to "reassess," or resubmit unsatisfactory work. Many students hailed this practice as the greatest strength of SBG, but

some were dismissive of reassessment as something that would "fail to pre-pare [them] for the real world" or would stigmatize them socially. It should be noted that there are many examples of "do-overs" in life: licensing, ac-creditation, and taxes are just a few areas in which corrections are not only accepted, but often expected. Indeed, Marzano (2000) noted that, in many professional realms, there is typically a good deal of editing or revising of drafts before a final product is released and that individuals are not evaluated on one project; judgment is often made over a body of their work.

## Social implications of standards-based grading

Finally, in response to students' concerns about the social implications of having to reassess, teachers may follow some useful suggestions from Wil-cox et al. (2013) to help students change their dispositions toward learning. Teachers must design courses so that students understand that learning is an ongoing process for everyone. As O'Connor (2010) noted, what matters is how much learning occurs, not *when* it occurs, and individual differences need to be respected by acknowledging that students learn at different rates. Ultimately, perhaps, there are ways to position reassessment and revision so that they are more fully integrated or expected for all students in order to minimize social implications.

## Concluding Thoughts

Although SBG appears to have much to offer, it does have its limitations, including the ability to directly improve teaching. In a new system with few precedents at the secondary level, there are bound to be inconsistencies in practice, which at Sojourn caused angst among survey respondents. Darling-Hammond (2014) cautioned that, when implementing major changes in educational practice, "that we not substitute new problems for familiar ones, but that we instead use moments of transformation to get it right."

Based on the critical responses analyzed here, one of the implications of this study is that "getting the transformation right" entails ongoing, regular conversations and the integration of feedback with, and among, stakeholders in the initiative. Among the concerns shared in the survey were those related to the pace and nature of grading change. Sojourn's interactions with stu-dents and parents may bring up questions for other districts considering SBG, such as whether the system would be more readily adopted by progressively introducing it in a comprehensive manner at the primary level, then bringing it along to each respective level as that cohort of students advanced through middle and high school. One student at Sojourn High argued persuasively for this model:

> I don't see the point in switching to standards-based so abruptly. If
> you'd started it with middle school kids they'd be used to it by high

school, but you're asking students who have gone through 11 years of schooling to change their entire philosophy. I'm not opposed to SBG nor do I think it's a bad method, but we're near the end of high school, when grades matter. Now we're changing everything, which [affects us] negatively. Mr. _____ helped me to think differently about this, which calmed my nerves a bit, but it doesn't change the fact that it was sprung on us and now [we're] struggling. I know you [believe] I'm thinking the wrong way . . . but I've been thinking this way my whole life and you can't expect me to change instantaneously…If we had more time to adjust it would be better.

The pace and progression of grading change can be debated, however, many who subscribe to the practice of SBG would argue that, once an educational construct has shown superior results, it is at least questionable, and at worst, unethical to not change practice. The prospect of returning to traditional grading is anathema to many teachers and administrators who have embraced SBG. One of those at Sojourn asserted:

Let's say the Board wiped this out and said we weren't doing it anymore. Not only would I not be here, I [know others who] would say, "I'm not going to teach in the system that we had previously…I feel like a new teacher, and I would never be able to go back and make the mistakes I did before. (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014)

This strong conviction and rationale, while persuasive, is complicated since many of the students may not yet recognize, or perhaps have not yet experienced, the results of SBG as being superior. As discussed previously, in order to develop leadership skills and agency, youth need to participate deeply, not to just "be heard." They need opportunities to truly influence issues that matter to them and actively solve problems (Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000; Fielding, 2001).

## Summary statement regarding implementation of SBG

As shown in the findings of student surveys at Sojourn High, the adoption of SBG is a challenging undertaking even in the best of conditions. As suggested by Peters and Buckmiller (2014), to enhance the likelihood of success in such initiatives, an intentional plan with a reasonable timeline, ongoing professional development, collaboration, and effective multi-directional communication about the purpose of grading is needed. Given the students' concerns, and in the spirit of increased transparency, schools need to figure out how to create environments for safe, honest conversations about students' beliefs and frustrations with regard to grading, so that relationships with teachers are not damaged. And, ideally, students should be included in decisions about grading in a meaningful way.

Such relationships and conversations are the foundation of what Lick-lider (1997) describes as the mission to integrate assessment so seamlessly into instruction that it becomes part of the learning process itself. This type of assessment is inherent in many co-curricular activities (e.g. athletics, drama, and the arts), where excellent teaching, intrinsic motivation and skilled learning take place, often without any grades at all. To the extent SBG efforts such as Sojourn's can replicate those seen in the best co-curricular environments, where regular, formative feedback between adults and students, student leadership opportunities, and high-stakes, performance-based summative assessments are the norm, they are more likely to produce a culture in which learners take responsibility for their own learning, motivated by the intrinsic worth of what is being learned (Kohn, 1994).

One of the ultimate aims of such cultures is for students to develop the essential skill of self-evaluating. If, as a text by Kallick and Zmuda (2017) points out, young people complete their schooling still dependent on others to tell them "when they are adequate, good or excellent, then we have missed the whole point of what education is about" (p. 280).

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