MAKING THE SWITCH
Getting Started With Standards-Based Assessment

By Lynne Jessup Michael

As a teacher, I have always felt that the traditional system of grading discourages students. While some students fight to get an A or to be valedictorian, others wonder why they should struggle at all. What are grades all about anyway? Do they prove that the student really understood the assignment? Or just that the student knew which answers were expected?

Over the years, questions like these have made me wish that the grading system could be scrapped altogether. But, after a year of training in standards-based assessment, I have been inspired to look at assessment in a new light.

With help from my students, I implemented a standards-based assessment system during the last school year. I began by basing my planning on the standards and benchmarks for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) Public Schools. For assessment, my students and I developed a rubric system based on a 0 to 4 scale. In this system, 0 represents no effort on the assignment and 4 represents work that is outstanding and above grade level. In addition to formal assessments, we also used informal types of assessment, including student self-assessment of reading ability and contribution to classroom discussions and peer assessments of speeches and hands-on projects.


Photo: Andrew Ramos

▷ The use of standards-based assessment helps students understand that everyone has strengths and weaknesses in different parts of the curriculum.

At mid-quarter I sent home a progress report. This report showed the assignments for the quarter, grouped by standard, and the student's level for each assignment. I cautioned the students that they would have to explain the system to their parents because it was new.

This system was immediately helpful for me. Since I could see where my lessons were focused, I could be sure I was covering all the standards. I could also see how to effectively group the students into small groups and who needed individual help. I went over the results with students and explained that I was grouping them to work on a specific item. That way they understood that each of them had areas where they could work to improve their learning. With each new lesson, the groups were re-formed so that students could see that each person has strengths and weaknesses in different areas of the curriculum.

The students' response was amazing. What they liked best about the system was that a try was worth something, since the only way to get a 0 was to make no effort at all. Once they realized this, students began completing all their assignments. The collaboration in small groups improved, and because they shared the same learning challenge, the problem of having one student in the group who knows all the answers and dominates the lesson was eliminated.

At the end of the semester, I designed a simpler system to report grades by indicating the students' level for each standard. I asked the students how the six standards should be weighted. They felt that all six were equally important so that is how I calculated the final level. Then I added a row for the final exam and a row that averaged all seven scores. I based the report formats on ideas from Robert Marzano's book *Transforming Classroom Grading* (2000). An example of a standards-based report card adapted from Marzano's book can be found in the sidebar.

The switch to standards-based assessment raises some interesting questions. For example, some students who had barely done any work at the beginning of the year began to work much harder as the school year progressed. Should the work at the beginning of the year be weighted equally with the work at the end of the year?

In the process of making sure my assessments are standards-based, I have seen that assessment can be a tool for teaching and learning rather than a method to separate students and judge them. It is a kinder, gentler way to teach and gives students a great deal of control over their learning.

Lynne Jessup Michael is Chair of the English Department at Rota High School in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

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Sample Standards-Based Report Card for Grade 11 Mathematics Class

Student name:		
Class: Algebra II and Trigonometry		Standards Rating
		(1) (2) (3) (4)
Mathematics Standard 1:	Numeric Problem Solving	------------2.0
Mathematics Standard 2:	Computation	------------------3.25
Mathematics Standard 3:	Measurement	-----------------------4.0
Mathematics Standard 4:	Geometry	---------------2.75
Mathematics Standard 5:	Probability	--------------2.5
Mathematics Standard 6:	Functions	--------------------3.5
Mathematics Standard 7:	Data Analysis	-----------------------4.0
Reasoning Standard:	Decision Making	--------1.5
Communication Standard:	Written	------------------3.25
Communication Standard:	Oral	------------2.0
Nonachievement Factor:	Effort	-----------------3.0
Mathematics Achie vement: 3.14	Overall: 2.89	

Adapted by permission of McREL from Robert Marzano, Transforming Classroom Grading, *2000, p. 107.*