Grading for Mastery

February 15, 2023

<u>Presentation by:</u>
David Pulsipher, Teacher - Westlake High School
Sean Flaherty, Teacher - Newbury Park High School

Overview

The purpose of grading for mastery is to objectively measure students' learning of academic content standards by remedying the proven shortcomings of traditional grading systems.

Mastery grading embraces certain research-supported principles and practices that benefit both students and teachers.

This year in CVUSD, some actions toward mastery grading have been taken and reflected upon.

Two Personal Journeys Toward Mastery Grading

David Pulsipher, math teacher, Westlake High School

- Son excels on AP Psychology exam yet fails the AP Psych class?!
- Why were students getting high report grades when they had underperformed in the curricular standards?
- Homework grades did not reflect performance on assessments.

Sean Flaherty, Spanish teacher, Newbury Park High School

- Responding to the drug war in Colombia, a pilot program in the '90s sought to ensure basic proficiency with respect to all essential concepts and skills.
- Increased focus on assessing benchmark standards and repeated opportunities for students to reach proficiency.

Why Not Traditional Grading? Why Mastery Grading?

- While traditional grading evaluates content knowledge, it also evaluates behaviors, thus inviting subjectivity and bias.

- In traditional grading, because of their teacher's biases, two students with very different curricular performance levels may receive the same grade; likewise, one student's curricular performance level may yield different grades for two different teachers, due to their biases.

- Mastery Grading focuses on understanding of content (standards-aligned tests and grades).

- Mastery Grading principles and practices are supported by research.

- Mastery Grading eliminates any need for "Grade Hacks" that allow teachers to manipulate the grading program so that the grade "matches" the student (e.g. extra credit, dropping lowest grade, not counting certain assignments in the grade total).

- Mastery Grading does NOT mean: lowering expectations, grading students differently because of their demographic status, allowing students endless opportunities to retake tests, giving credit for incomplete work, contrived equal outcomes, etc.

Three Pillars for Mastery Grading

Accurate

"Grading must use calculations that are mathematically sound, easy to understand, and correctly describe a student's level of academic performance."

Bias-Resistant

"Grades should be based on valid evidence of a student's content knowledge, and not based on evidence that is likely to be corrupted by a teacher's implicit bias or reflect a student's environment."

Motivational

"The way we grade should motivate students to achieve academic success, support a growth mindset, and give students opportunities for redemption. The way we grade should be transparent and understandable that every student can know her grade at any time and know how to get the grade she wants."

Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. SAGE Publications, 2018.

Key Practices for Mastery Grading

Accurate

Avoiding zeros

Minimum grading

0-4 Scale

Weighting more recent performance

Grades based on an individual's achievement, not the group's

Bias-Resistant

Grades based on required content, not extra credit

Grades based on student work, not the timing of work

Alternative (non-grade) consequence for cheating

Excluding participation and effort

Grades based entirely on summative assessments, not formative assessments (such as homework)

Motivational

Minimum grading and 0-4 scale

Renaming grades

Retakes and redos

Rubrics

Grades based on standards scales, not points

Standards based gradebooks

Emphasizing self-regulation

Creating a community of feedback

Student trackers

Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. SAGE Publications, 2018.

Why is This so Challenging?

- Mindset and paradigm shifts are always difficult (traditional practices are deeply ingrained for teachers, students, and parents).
- No formal training in teacher preparation programs
- Many misconceptions about mastery grading
- Lack of community buy-in and concern about parent/guardian pushback
- Some students don't immediately make the connection between soft skills and high performance on summative evaluations.
- Many teachers want to count soft-skills (i.e. participation, organization) in grades.
- It's difficult for some teachers to let go of "control" established through grading.
- Concerns about lack of motivation in students
- Lack of time for teachers to prepare and replace old systems

Benefits

Benefits to Students:

- More motivation to take risks and seek help
- More questions and clarity about content standards and how to master them
- Appreciation for the chance to show improvement after setbacks
- Increased sense of responsibility and investment in their education
- Developed sense of course content as having real-world currency
- Setbacks are destigmatized

Benefits to Teachers:

- The students' focus is now on learning, not "points".
- Working smarter, not harder
- Greater clarity about expectations
- Grades no longer used to control behavior
- Teacher is now seen more as a facilitator than an authority who requires "handling".
- No more A's due to inflation and fewer D's and F's.
- Q doesn't determine students' final grades: teachers do.

Student Feedback

Standards-Based Grading:
- "Puts less pressure on me and I can focus on learning"
- "I found that I was easily able to identify which standards I needed more work on and which standards were easier for me. It allowed me to better understand what concepts I understood and which ones I needed more practice on. Labeling the standards was a great way for me to understand my level."
- "I think the way the class is set up is quite smart, as it encourages students to actually try and learn in the class rather than just do the work they need to and get an A. The only way a student could truly get anything less than an A in the class is by not putting the extra effort in or not showing any desire to actually learn, and I feel as though most students who complain about the system don't realize this. The class only seems "harder" than others because it forces students to genuinely try."
- "The multiple opportunities we receive to improve our grade, as well as the intense focus on actually learning rather than just getting an A in the class and a map of what skills we are trying to master in the course."

Traditional Grading:
- "Feel defined by the grade and therefore more stressed and obsessed about grades rather than learning."
- "Makes it harder to recover from a low grade."
- "Focus on getting a higher grade with low retention."

What We've Done and Learned Along the Way

Provided introductory presentation and discussion with all high school teachers in August 2022, and middle school teachers November 2022.

Initiated a book study on Grading For Equity by Joe Feldman for small groups of high school and middle school teachers to discuss and begin implementing the book's concepts.

Feedback from teachers:

- "The book confirms how much we are in need of new grading procedures. The current system squashes a lot of incentive to learn for the sake of learning."
- "It's difficult to not feel like I have been failing students with my grading practices the past 20 years. It is also difficult to give up some of the beliefs that are ingrained about missing and late work, grades being based on summative assessments, etc. It is made so clear how our traditional system is so inequitable."
- "It is hard to do this when we have an education system that priorities "A's" in the college admission process. I can't blame students for stressing over an "A" when it could very much impact the schools they get into. I can of course preach a growth mindset, and I can encourage students at all academic levels, but we should recognize that we have a systematic problem that will take several changes to fully address."
- "That we can move away from a system that rewards certain behaviors and creates a fear of failure. I hope to see a system that encourages learning and growth over time."

Questions?