

# Mastery- Minded Grading in Secondary Schools

In Solon, Iowa, teachers' gradebooks describe students' current levels of learning, supplanting the usual potpourri of scores

BY MATT TOWNSLEY

**“It** sounded great in theory,” Rowan’s mom told the principal of her son’s high school near the end of the first quarter, before she lamented, “Why aren’t tests, quizzes and homework showing up in the grade book? I just want to know how he is doing in class!”

This conversation took place at a rural secondary school back in 2012. The mother — we’ll call her Amy Buhrman, a pseudonym — was referring to her first encounter with standards-based grading. The latter represented a rather dramatic shift in student grading, assessment and reporting practices, then in its early stages, at Solon High School in a small community near Iowa City, Iowa.

Overhauling the gradebook to communicate which aspects of a course students have mastered as well as the ones that need more work was a big turn away from the traditional reporting of grades for homework, projects and tests. Buhrman was certainly not alone in her uncertainty about this unique grading scheme. Despite the district’s history of elementary school use of standards-based report cards for more than 20 years, a small group of parents questioned these grading practices during its infancy in our rural high school of 450 stu-

dents. After all, high schools have a longstanding tradition of points-based gradebooks.

That's still the case. In Iowa, a recent statewide survey sent to school district leaders estimated that fewer than 10 of the state's 300 or so high schools use standards-based grading.

### Supporting Mastery

Solon High School's transcript has remained the same over the years. However, the information shared in our standards-based gradebook looks much different now for parents and students.

## A Sample Standards-Based Gradebook

Standards-based gradebooks communicate the student's strengths and weaknesses relative to the course standards. In addition, practice completion is reported, though these assignments do not count toward the student's final course grade.

In the sample gradebook below, the student has a strong understanding of several standards, including the ability to cite text evidence. Two current areas of growth are "determining author's point of view" and "analyzing author's claims" — deficiencies that may be due in part to a missing reading-response practice activity.

### English 10

DATE	STANDARD	SCORE
9/15	Identify theme or central idea of a text.	4/4
9/20	Persuasion quick write	✓
9/25	Persuasive paper - rough draft	✓
10/15	Cite text evidence to support analysis.	4/4
10/15	Write arguments to support claims.	3/4
10/20	Reading response - practice	✗
10/30	Analyze author's claims.	2/4
10/30	Determine author's point of view.	1/4

- |                           |               |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| 1 = Minimal understanding | ✓ = Collected |
| 2 = Partial understanding | ✗ = Missing   |
| 3 = Getting close!        | L = Late      |
| 4 = You got it!           | Ab = Absent   |

Rather than documenting scores on a potpourri of homework, projects and tests, our online grade book describes students' current levels of learning course standards. These indicators are converted to a letter grade for each course at the end of each reporting period.

The three major tenets of our secondary standards-based grade book are: communicating current levels of learning based upon standards; eliminating the influence of practice work on the final grade; and providing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding.

#### ► Communicating current levels of learning.

To help hesitant students become comfortable with these changes, a math teacher at Solon High School asked students in his class who also were involved in band to share their feedback. Rose, the second-chair flute player, told the math teacher her band instructor, Mr. C., often provided her specific guidance such as "Rhythm could be better, but you're exceptional at hitting high notes." This led to a classwide conversation about the type of feedback typically provided to high school students on math tests.

Following a weeklong discussion about the merits of this change, the math teacher decided to provide his geometry students with feedback on each course standard when handing back the next unit test, rather than merely a percentage of correct points earned. By communicating current levels of learning based upon standards in parent-friendly language in the electronic grade book, the teacher helped these students and their parents to identify ongoing areas of strength and improvement.

#### ► Recording but not calculating practice assignments and homework.

A sports analogy illustrates why practice work does not count toward the final grade in a standards-based grade book.

Solon High School's varsity football team has a stellar reputation around Iowa, in one stretch winning the state title four years in a row. It's safe to say Coach Kevin Miller has incredibly detailed and purposeful plans for each practice session between football games, yet a poor practice does not show up on the scoreboard prior to each game's kickoff. The score for every contest begins 0-0.

In the same manner, students should not be penalized for practicing their learning poorly.

Instead of assigning a point value for completed or accurate homework, we report symbols in the gradebook documenting completion in the gradebook with such notations as collected, missing, late or absent. This information allows parents and students to view the level of practice being completed while focusing on the numbers entered in the gradebook that describe the student's current level of understanding relative to course standards. (See related story on page 18, which illustrates the online gradebook.)

► **Providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding.**

The final tenet of standards-based grading is providing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding because students learn at different rates. Imagine a student, call him Bobby, who struggles to understand stoichiometry (the study of chemical reactions) after completing a series of assigned worksheets. His frustration

grows following a Wednesday quiz in which he successfully answers only half of the problems. Meanwhile, his classmate, Suzy, aces the same worksheets and the quiz.

After a Thursday after-school tutorial with the chemistry teacher, Bobby has a lightbulb moment in which he fully grasps the concept. Bobby and Suzy both ace the unit test, yet in a classroom with traditional grading, these two students earn different grades.

Now consider a third student, Jo-Jo, who fails the unit test, but later takes advantage of the same enlightening tutorial session offered by the chemistry teacher. Standards-based grading permits students to work toward mastery by offering Jo-Jo a second opportunity to demonstrate her understanding of stoichiometry beyond the initial

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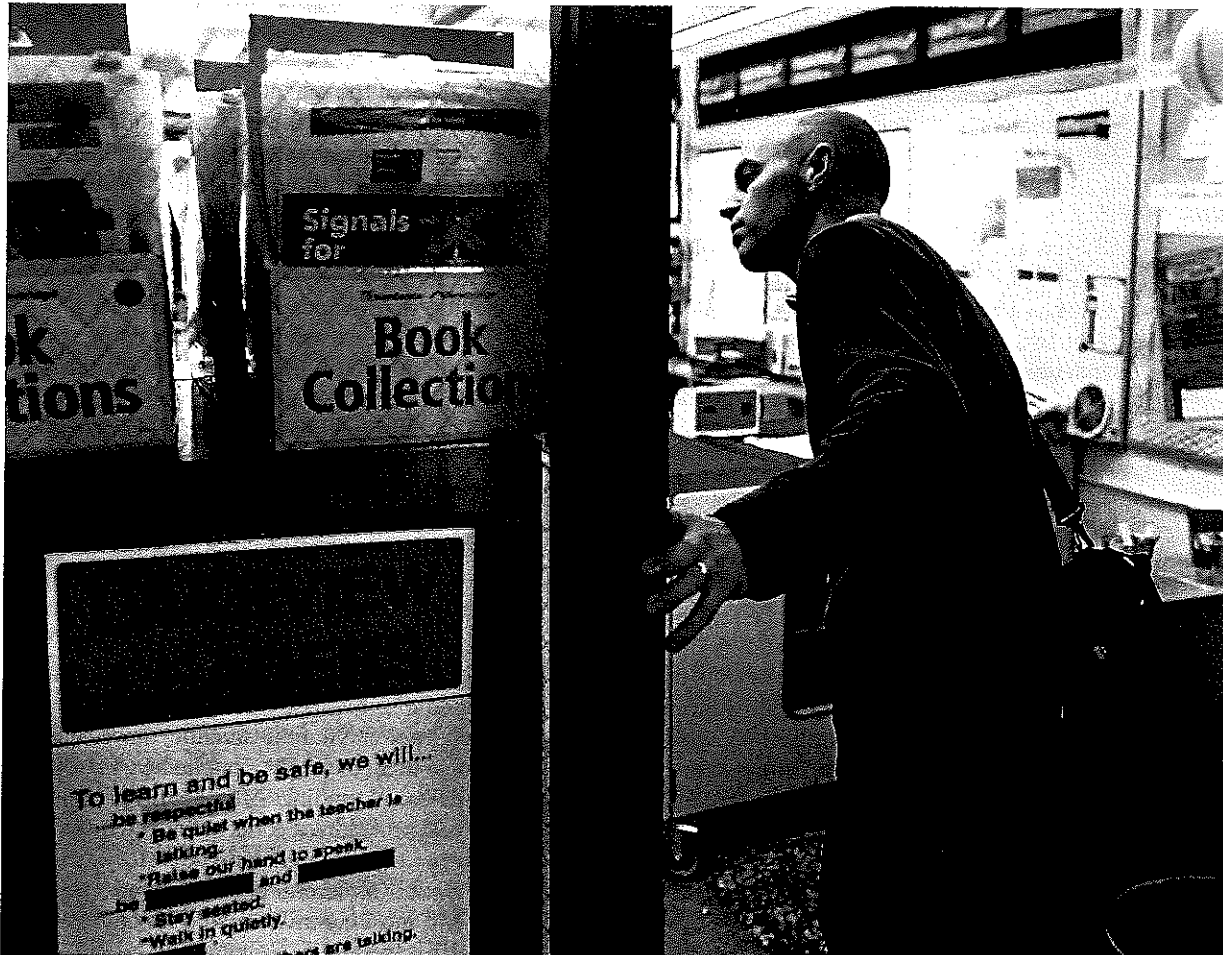
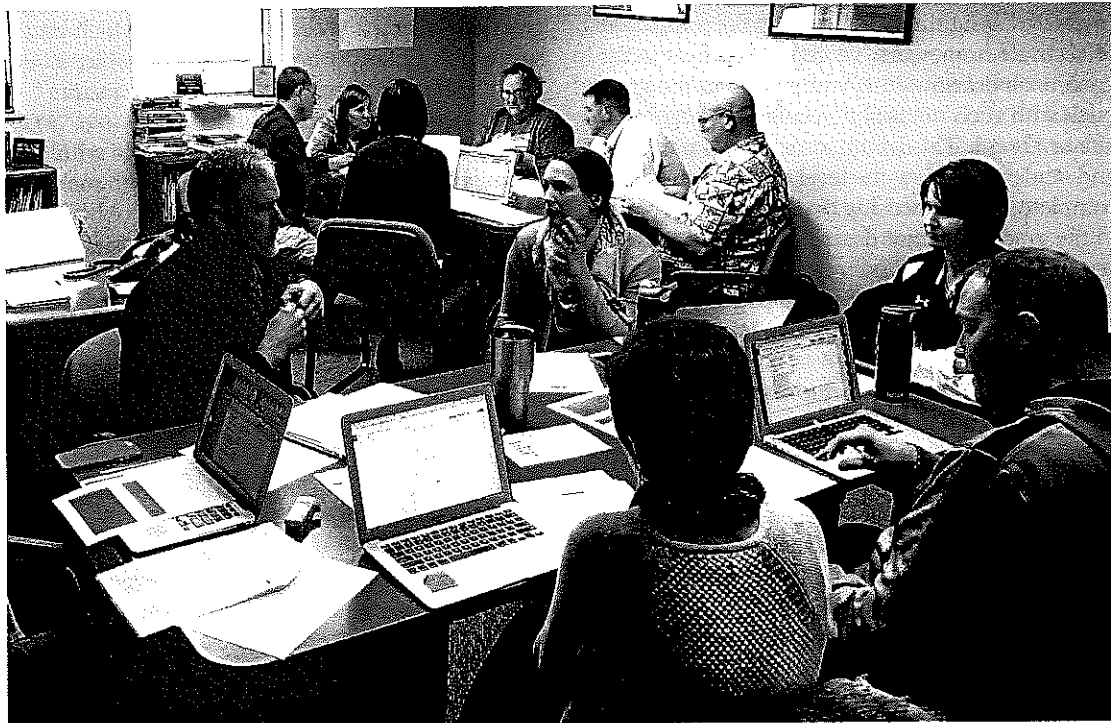


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The grading committee consists of teachers and administrators in the Solon, Iowa, district, where standards-based grading started with eight teachers in 2008.

all-class assessment. Upon demonstrating a similar level of proficiency as Bobby and Suzy, Jo-Jo will earn a mark in the gradebook similar to the other two, regardless of the time in which each student provided evidence of learning.

#### Multiple-Year Process

Solon's shift to standards-based grading began at the grassroots level in 2008 when eight teachers initially participated in a 10-week after-school study of effective grading practices. After plenty of reading and candid discourse, all teachers in the study group began to implement one or more tenets of standards-based grading.

After observing several years of trial and error in these classrooms, district administrators shared with the community a goal they had established to study standards-based grading practices during the 2011-12 school year. With considerable experimentation under their belt, the early-adopting high school teachers provided informal support for colleagues who were initially unsure about the proposed change.

Following a year of professional reading,

presentations to the school board and a community forum, 82 percent of our secondary faculty either were already using standards-based grading practices or voted to take the next steps with additional support. The board of education unanimously approved a two-year implementation timeline.

The first year included just-in-time professional learning for teachers such as writing standards-based, grading-ready assessments and implementing at least one course. The second year focused on full implementation in all courses. We have reported progress regularly to the board of education on several occasions, and we have now created a standards-based grading implementation guide for newly hired teachers.

#### Parent Misconceptions

The transition to reporting students' level of mastery in the gradebook has not always been smooth. Late in the first year of the board-approved implementation timeline, more than 100 people turned out for a public hearing on standards-based grading. After hearing about two dozen speakers address concerns at the hearing, the board of education assigned district administrators to address several parent misconceptions.

The two most common dealt with college applications and reality beyond high school.

► *"You've put my child at a disadvantage in applying to college.*

The most frequently cited parent misconception was that the shift to standards-based grading would be a disadvantage in the college admissions process. Most schools that have overhauled their grading and reporting practices are at the elementary level. These elementary standards-based report cards do not often communicate a letter grade.

At Solon High School, standards noted in the online gradebook are used to calculate a final course grade. College admissions offices use letter grades and grade-point averages clearly documented on the high school transcript to make admissions decisions. (See related stories on pages 22 and 26.)

Upon fully understanding the final grade calculation based on standards, some parents continued to express frustration because students at neighboring schools were using points from graded homework to inflate letter grades. We were quick to agree. However, as an equalizer, students at Solon High School were provided additional opportunities to improve their standard marks in the gradebook, which competing high schools did not offer.

Ensuring parents understood how letter grades were calculated and reported on the transcript was paramount during our early years.

► *"This isn't how it works for anyone in the real world!"*

Another parent misconception involved teaching to mastery through standards-based grading. Each year at the orientation program for parents of freshmen, Solon's high school principal proactively addresses this concern by asking those in attendance rhetorically how many passed the road test for a car driver's license on their first try or attempted the nursing licensure board exams on more than one occasion.

We must communicate that our goal in public education is to ensure every student succeeds. Life outside of school does indeed offer multiple opportunities for mastery. Through that messaging, parents are able to see how standards-based grading benefits their students.

### Ongoing Refinement

We are five years into standards-based grading and we are still fine-tuning our practices in Solon. We continue to develop systems and structures

to support students similar to Jo-Jo who are juggling the responsibility of learning content alongside the class while finding time to participate in tutorials and then reassess prior standards.

Furthermore, because many electronic gradebooks were designed for traditional grading rather than standards-based grading, we are continually retrofitting the gradebook to more accurately communicate learning to students and parents. Our work is a collaborative effort between a standards-based grading task force and district administrators.

During the past five years, hundreds of teachers from other districts have visited our high school to learn about this dramatic shift from a classroom perspective. Meanwhile, students are being admitted to institutions of higher learning at expected levels. Most importantly, Rowan's mom knows exactly what her son has learned in school and where he still needs to improve. ■

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## Additional Resources

Author Matt Townsley recommends these informational resources for school district leaders who want to learn more about standards-based grading, in addition to others collected on his website ([www.mctownsley.net](http://www.mctownsley.net)).

### BOOKS

- *FAST Grading: A Guide to Implementing Best Practices* by Douglas Reeves, Solution Tree, Bloomington, Ind.
- *How to Grade for Learning: Linking Grades to Standards, (4th edition)* by Ken O'Connor, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- *On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting* by Tom Guskey, Solution Tree, Bloomington, Ind.

### ELECTRONIC

- "All Things Standards-Based Grading" by Matt Townsley, <http://mctownsley.net/standards-based-grading>
- "A Case for Standards-Based Grading and Reporting" by Ken O'Connor, *School Administrator*, January 2017, <http://bit.ly/standards-based-grading>
- "Standards-Based Grading Videos" by Matt Townsley, [www.sbgvideos.org](http://www.sbgvideos.org)
- "Starting the Conversation about Grading" by Susan M. Brookhart, *Educational Leadership*, November 2011, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov11/vol69/num03/Starting-the-Conversation-About-Grading.aspx>

