The Case Against Letter Grades:
Transforming communication about student learning

Changing Practice Workshop Series 2015
Report Cards from the past

Reflect and discuss own report card experiences
Learning Intentions

To help parents understand…

✧ How students’ learning is assessed and evaluated
✧ What is assessed and evaluated
✧ How assessment is integrated into daily teaching and learning
✧ How student learning will be reported to parents next school year
Communication About Learning

As a parent, what do you want to hear about your child’s learning?

- Cluster stickies
- Mind Map
Communication About Learning

The function or purpose of communication about learning is to:

- Move learning along a continuum
- Promote growth mindset and life-long learning
- Encourage metacognitive reflection
- Develop self-efficacy
- Increase ownership of, “buy-in”, and empowerment over learning
Reflecting on Assessment

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcg0ay4
Types of Assessment

Formative and Summative
Assessment for Learning

“Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence.”

Black, Wiliam et al. 2004
Assessment as Learning

“Assessment as learning is a metacognitive process in which students take ownership for improving their own learning. It involves students setting learning goals as well as monitoring, reflecting upon, and adjusting their own learning, often in response to feedback from the teacher and their peers.”

Earl, 2003
Assessment of Learning

“Assessment of learning includes those tasks that are designed to determine how much learning has occurred after a significant period of instruction. The data from such assessments is often used to determine report card grades.”

Earl, 2003
“...assessment which is explicitly designed to promote learning is the single most powerful tool we have for both raising standards and empowering lifelong learners.”

Assessment for Learning: Beyond the Black Box, 1999, University of Cambridge School of Education
“We must constantly remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to have students become self-evaluating. If students graduate from our school still dependent upon others to tell them when they are adequate, good, or excellent, then we’ve missed the whole point of what education is about.”  

(p. 280)

The Case Against Grades

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2Co6_tu808
Grading Practices
Issues of validity, reliability, and purpose

Grades have been used to serve three general purposes simultaneously:

- **Ranking** - for sorting students into those eligible for higher education and those not eligible
- **Reporting results** - accounting to parents the degree to which students learned what was prescribed for them to learn
- **Contributing to learning** - providing feedback and motivating students  
  (Brookhart, 2004, p. 23)
Grading Practices

Issues of validity, reliability, and purpose

Ranking and reporting results - accounting to parents the degree to which students learned what was prescribed for them to learn.

Teachers have different philosophies, different techniques, weighting, means of determining a letter grade resulting in grades that are not comparable from one context to another within the same class and from teacher to teacher, with greatly varying results.

“It is like measuring the physical growth of a student throughout the year using a measuring tape that changes how long an inch is from one measure to the next.”

(Marzano, 2010, p. 41)
Grading Practices

Issues of validity, reliability, and purpose

Contributing to learning - providing feedback and motivating students:

A “B” in English does not provide clear communication about what, specifically, a student can do, what is understood, or where the student needs help – nor does it provide the feedback needed for learning to continue.
Effects of Grading
From: Degrading to De-Grading  By Alfie Kohn

1. Grades tend to reduce students’ interest in the learning itself.

   The more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward (Kohn, 1993).
Effects of Grading
From Degrading to De-Grading
By Alfie Kohn

2. Grades tend to reduce students’ preference for challenging tasks.

Students of all ages who have been led to concentrate on getting a good grade are likely to pick the easiest possible assignment if given a choice.

(Harter, 1978; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Kage, 1991; Milton et al., 1986)
3. Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking.

- Students given numerical grades were significantly less creative than those who received qualitative feedback but no grades.

- The more the task required creative thinking, the worse the performance of students who knew they were going to be graded.

- Providing students with comments in addition to a grade didn’t help: the highest achievement occurred only when comments were given instead of numerical scores.

(Butler, 1987; Butler, 1988; Butler and Nisan, 1986).
When the classroom culture focuses on rewards, gold stars, grades, or class ranking, then (students) look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning. One reported consequence is that, when they have any choice, (students) avoid difficult tasks. They also spend time and energy looking for clues to the “right answer”.

“Inside the Black Box”, Black & Wiliam, 1998
Growth vs. Fixed Mindset
Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck

In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success—without effort.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TskeE43Q1M
Growth vs. Fixed Mindset
Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck

In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Virtually all great people have had these qualities.

Students who believe that academic achievement is determined by fixed ability are more likely to work toward **performance** goals (i.e., grades) to please the teacher and appear competent. For these students, grades are the currency in school, and the exchange value for grades is more important than the learning....Students who attribute academic success to their own **efforts** (growth mindset) are more likely to adopt **learning** goals, which means they are motivated by an increasing sense of mastery and by the desire to **become** more competent.

(Lorna Earl, 2003, p.36)
Self-efficacy

- Perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions
- Can I do this?

  - If the answer is “yes” the student is more likely to engage in the tasks, put effort into the task, focus and apply him/herself in the learning task
  - If the answer is no, students lesson effort or avoid/abort their involvement in the task

(Marzano & Pickering, 2011, p. 15-16)

Engagement has one of the greatest effects on learning
The effects of perceptions of self on a learner

- Efficacy is determined in part by a students’ sense of “possible selves”

- Effect-size of self-efficacy on students’ academic performance = 0.82

  (associated with a 29 percentile gain - Meta analysis of 38 studies)  (Marzano & Pickering, 2011, p. 15-16)

- As few as two “poor” scores or letter grades can significantly damage students’ perceptions of their abilities as a learner
The bottom line is that we place a bit too much emphasis on one mark or grade in our society. Grades are inferences, personal interpretations on the part of the teacher, not infallible truths about students' mastery. We err when we attach too much self-worth and celebration to so fleeting a moment, so inaccurate a tool, so subjective an overworked teacher's judgment. Grades are fragile things on which to base so much. It's worth keeping them in perspective.

(Wormeli, 2006, p. 95)
Where to next?

Perspective

Steps

Change
Why seek an alternative?

Research has demonstrated that current grading practices are actually lowering student achievement…and worse, “typical grading practices don’t even do the one thing they are supposed to do, which is tell us what students know” and provide an accurate indication of student achievement.

“As soon as students get a grade the learning stops…so we have to deal with it and design assessment systems accordingly.”

(Wiliam, 2011, p. 122-23)
Matching Curriculum Targets with Assessment Tasks

**Worth being familiar with**

**Important to know and do**

**Enduring understandings/ Essential skills**

**Assessment Types**
- *Traditional quizzes & tests*
  - paper/pencil
- *Performance Tasks & Projects*
  - open-ended
  - complex
  - authentic
- *Oral Assessments*
  - conferences
  - interviews
  - oral questioning

Adapted from Wiggins and McTighe,
Understanding by Design
Why look for alternatives?

“If grades stop learning, students should be given them as infrequently as possible. In high school, there may be an argument for one per marking period but certainly no more. In middle school, there may be a case for grades once a year, but in elementary school, the use of grades appears to be entirely unjustified.”

(Wiliam, 2011, p. 123)
Why seek alternatives to grading?

“Decades of psychometric tradition have created a mythology of measurement that has convinced students, parents, and teachers that anything that can be taught and learned can be measured. Educators have a responsibility to challenge the mythology of measurement by reframing assessment’s primary purpose: that is, to improve learning.”

(Cooper, 2011, p.88)
Mission: to sift and sort students
Mission: Excellence from ALL

50%

Proficiency
Why seek alternatives to grading?

“What did I get?” or “How did I do?” must give way to statements like “I met the first three criteria on the rubric; I still think I need to work on the organization of my ideas.” (Cooper, 2011, p.88)

To develop growth mindset, self-efficacy, resiliency, and the qualities that generate life-long learners, we must develop students’ abilities to be self-assessors – to be able to identify and articulate what they know, understand and can do, know what they must do to move their learning forward and how to improve the quality of their work. **Formative assessment is the vehicle for change.**
“If you wanted to make JUST ONE change that would immediately reduce student failure rates, then the most effective place to start would be challenging prevailing grading practices.”

Douglas B. Reeves, Ed. Leadership.

February 2008, pg. 85
Standards Based Grading

Assessment Practices Now
Alternatives to letter-grade and 100-point scale (%) reporting:

Standards-based grading:

- Use proficiency scales that delineate both the topic and the level of complexity being measured
- Rubrics
  - Learning progressions (proficiency scales) shown in a matrix that describe content relative to specific topics/concepts, revealing an incremental increase in proficiency with respect to knowledge, understanding, skill
- Continuums of learning identified by descriptive language
Levels of competence example:

**Beginning**
- With help/prompting student demonstrates limited competence with simple content with respect to the targeted learning goals.
- With support, is able to show some basic knowledge, understandings and skills in situations that are the same as those modeled and practiced.

**Developing**
- Student demonstrates partial competence with simple content with respect to the targeted learning goals.
- Is able to apply knowledge, understandings and skills in situations similar to those modeled and practiced, with occasional support.

**Accomplishing**
- Student can independently demonstrate full competence with more complex content with respect to the targeted learning goals.
- Independently demonstrates the ability to apply knowledge, understandings and skills to new situations.

**Innovating**
- Student can independently demonstrate exceptional competence synthesizing sophisticated/specialized content with respect to the targeted learning goals.
- Independently and expertly transfers knowledge, understandings and skills to unique/novel situations.

(Adapted from Marzano, 2010, p. 45)
Alternatives

A strong case can be made that student achievement will be positively affected if standards-based reporting is rooted in good use of formative assessment (Marzano, 2010)

- Students working with clear descriptions of the learning “journey” (“next steps” in learning clearly explained, modeled, demonstrated)
- Students self- assessing and tracking their own learning progress/journey
- Descriptive feedback form teachers and peers, guiding students through “next steps” – Helping students get from “here to there” in their learning
Assessment and Communicating Student Learning

IB PYP
What is the PYP perspective on assessment?

- Assessment is integral to all teaching and learning.
- It is central to the PYP goal of thoughtfully and effectively guiding students through the five essential elements of learning: the acquisition of knowledge, the understanding of concepts, the mastering of skills, the development of attitudes and the decision to take action.
- The prime objective of assessment in the PYP is to provide feedback on the learning process.
Assessment FOR Learning is *MOST* Important

- Involves the gathering and analysis of information about student performance
- It is designed to inform practice
- It identifies what students know, understand, can do, and feel at different stages in the learning process.
- Students are actively engaged in assessing their own progress as part of the development of their wider critical-thinking and self-assessment skills.
Alternatives

Feedback to inform learning is the best way to advance learning.

“Feedback functions formatively only if the information fed back to the learner is used by the learner in improving performance.”

(Wiliam, 2011, p.120)

Effective feedback is:

- A recipe for future action
- Given in a timely fashion with time provided for acting on the feedback
- Focused and Specific
- Actionable
- Genuine, helpful, and meaningful to the individual
- Explicitly attached to/related to learning target/goals and criteria
The place of Assessment in Curriculum Planning and Teaching

- **Summative assessment** tasks are linked to the central idea of either the transdisciplinary unit of inquiry or of any teaching outside the programme of inquiry.

- Unit of Inquiry Reports - Students reflect on their learning

- Teachers will develop ways to assess prior knowledge and skills in order to plan their teaching.

- Teachers will be assessing students’ learning in context, daily. *(formative assessments).*
The PYP approach to assessment recognizes the importance of assessing the process of inquiry as well as the product(s) of inquiry, and aims to integrate and support both.
When responding to your child’s schoolwork, try the following:

✧ Give specific, positive feedback (I can see you were being thoughtful when you____.)

✧ Ask your child questions, refraining from responding by passing personal judgments (e.g., “I think you could have…”). Instead, use questions to lead your child to personally reflect on what they have learned and how well they did.
Building Self-Efficacy at Home

Conversations that develop student self-assessment and reflections on learning.
Examples of questions to ask:

- What were you learning? What was the assignment?
- What was your favourite part when engaging in the learning and why?
- What was your least favourite part of the learning and why?
- What did you find easy? Difficult? What took the greatest effort? What do you need to know more about? What is still confusing or challenging?
- What did you learn from doing this? What did this tell you about your learning?
- If you were to do this activity/task again what would you do differently and why?
Listen First!

- Listen carefully to what children have to say in response to your questions, encouraging explanation:
  - Tell me more about….
  - What do you mean by…?
  - Why do you think that? How did you come to that conclusion? What are you wondering now?
- Encourage constructive reflections:
  - I think I could do better next time if I…(instead of negative self-talk: “I can’t”)
Set Relevant and Realistic Goals

Help your child set realistic learning goals with specific timelines and strategies

- What have you mastered so far – what do you know/understand/can do?
- What do you need to do next in your learning?
- What do you need to do to achieve this goal?

Support your child in their efforts to work towards the goal and through questioning, lead them to reflect on their level of achievement without imposing own views. (Did you achieve your goal? Why or Why not? What do you need to do next?)
References:

Books:


Additional Resources/Sources

On-line

Marzano R., & Heflebower, T.  *Grades that show what students know: Best Practices suggest four ways to make the most of standards-based grading and reporting.*  Educational Leadership, November 2011


Stiggins, R. & Chappuis, J.  *What a difference a word makes: Assessment FOR learning rather than assessment OF learning helps students succeed*


Effective Grading Practices


O’Connor, Ken.  *How to grade for learning*

Brookhart, S. Starting the conversation about grading


Letter Grades Deserve and ‘F’


Surrey School District extends its no letter-grade program


Globe and Main: Why some schools are giving letter grades a fail


National Post: Calgary eliminates letter grades

http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/06/10/calgary-eliminates-letter-grades-for-students-up-to-grade-nine-in-an-attempt-to-save-children-from-failure/#_federated=1

Can we get beyond Letter Grades?

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may06/vol63/num08/Can-We-Get-Beyond-Letter-Grades.aspx
How we record and use assessment information

Toxic Grading Practices
Doug Reeves

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jduiAnm-O3w&app=desktop

Rick Wormeli:
Standards-based grading

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-QF9Q4gxVM&app=desktop

How to record criterion-Referenced Assessments:  What does your grade book look like?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC7ZI8zr_Mk&feature=related

Sir Ken Robinson: Bring on the learning revolution

http://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinsonBring_on_the_revolution

http://www.edutopia.org/10-assessment-tips-for-class

(select Kaufmann video)
Videos & TED talks

Doug Reeves: Toxic Grading Practices
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jduiAnm-O3w&app=desktop

Rick Wormeli: Standards-based grading
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-QF9Q4gxVM&app=desktop

How to record criterion-Referenced Assessments: What does your grade book look like?
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC7ZI8zr_Mk&feature=related

Changing Education Paradigms by Sir Ken Robinson
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U

Sir Ken Robinson: Bring on the learning revolution
http://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinsonBring_on_the_revolution