

Letter to the Editor

Jan 13, 2016

Editor's note: Rick Wormeli is responding to several lengthier letters to the editor about standards based learning/grading published in recent editions of the Summit. Wormeli's response will be published in a two-part letter to the editor Jan. 13 and Jan. 20.

To the editor:

In recent letters to the editor in the Summit, my work was mentioned as one catalyst for the shift in grading practices in Forest City Schools from traditional to standards-based grading. Many of the claims made by the authors misrepresent me and these practices, however, and I'd like to set the record straight.

Most of us think the purpose of grading is to report what students are learning, as well as how students are progressing in their disciplines. It is important for grades to be accurate, we say, otherwise we can't use grades to make instructional decisions, provide accurate feedback, or document student progress.

These are wise assertions for grading. Nowhere in these descriptions, however, is grading's purpose stated as teaching students to meet deadlines, persevere in the midst of adversity, work collaboratively with others, care for those less fortunate than ourselves, or to maintain organized notebooks. While these are important character attributes, we realize that none of the books or research reflecting modern teaching/parenting mentions grading as the way in which we instill these important values in our children.

We actually know how to cultivate those values in others, but it isn't through punitive measures and antiquated notions of grading. Author of *Grading Smarter, Not Harder* (2014), Myron Dueck, writes,

"Unfortunately, many educators have fallen into the trap of believing that punitive grading should be the chief consequence for poor decisions and negative behaviors. These teachers continue to argue that grading as punishment works, despite over 100 years of overwhelming research that suggests it does not (Guskey, 2011; Reeves, 2010)."

In 2012, researcher, John Hattie, published, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*, with research based on more than 900 meta-analyses, representing over 50,000 research articles, 150,000 effect sizes, and 240 million students. He writes,

"There are certainly many things that inspired teachers do not do; they do not use grading as punishment; they do not conflate behavioral and academic performance; they do not elevate quiet compliance over academic work; they do not excessively use worksheets; they do not have low expectations and keep defending low quality learning as 'doing your best'; they do not evaluate their impact by compliance, covering the curriculum, or conceiving explanations as to why they have little or no impact on their students; and they do not prefer perfection in homework over risk-taking that involves mistakes."

Those interested in research on standards-based grading and its elements are invited to read books written by Robert Marzano, Tom Guskey, Carol Dweck, Doug Reeves, John Hattie, Susan Brookhart,

Grant Wiggins, Tom Schimmer, and Ken O'Connor. Matt Townsley, Director of Instruction in Solon Community School District in Iowa has an excellent resource collection at <https://sites.google.com/a/solon.k12.ia.us/standards-based-grading/sbg-literature>.

A caution about worshipping at the research altar, however: 'Not all that is effective in raising our children has a research base. A constant chorus of, "Show me the research," adds distraction that keeps us from looking seriously and honestly at our practices. When we get our son up on his bicycle the first time, and he wobbles for stretch of sidewalk then crashes abruptly into the rhododendrons, we give him feedback on how to steer his bicycle, then ask him to try again. Where's the vetted research for doing that? It's not there, and **we don't stop good parenting because we don't have journaled research.**

Trying something, getting feedback on it, then trying it again, is one of the most effective ways to become competent at anything. How does an accountant learn to balance the books? Not by doing it once in a trumped up scenario in a classroom. Can a pilot re-do his landings? 'Hundreds of times in simulators and planes before he actually pilots a commercial airliner with real passengers. How do we learn to farm? By watching the modeling of elders and doing its varied tasks over and over ourselves. How do we learn to teach? By teaching a lot, not by doing it once or twice, then assuming we know all there is. I want a doctor who has completed dozens of surgeries like the one she's about to do on me successfully, not one who did one attempt during training.

This is how all us become competent. Some individuals push back against re-doing assignments and tests, however, because there's a limited research base for it, or so they claim (There's actually a lot of research on the power of reiterations in learning). My response to the push back is: ***When did incompetence become acceptable? How did we all learn our professions? Does demanding adult-level, post-certification performance in the first attempt at something during the young, pre-certification learning experience help students mature?***

Parents should be deeply concerned when teachers abdicate their adult roles and let students' immaturity dictate their learning. A child makes a first attempt to write a sentence but doesn't do it well, and the teacher records an F for, "Sentence Construction," in the gradebook with no follow-up instruction and direction to try it again? 'Really? We can't afford uninformed, ineffective teaching like this. To deny re-learning and assessment for the major standards we teach is educational malpractice. Parents should thank their lucky stars for teachers who live up to the promise to teach our children, whatever it takes.

We can't be paralyzed by the notion put forth by Dr. Laura Freisenborg in her Nov. 25 letter of juried journals of research as the only source of credibility. Dr. Friesenborg says that there has been, "...no robust statistical analysis of students national standardized test scores, pre- and post-implementation" of the practices for which I advocate. This is disingenuous because it's physically and statistically impossible to conduct such study, as there are so many confounding variables as to make the "Limitations of the Study" portion of the report the length of a Tom Clancy novel. We do not have the wherewithal to isolate student's specific outcomes as a direct function of teachers' varied and complex implementations of so many associated elements as we find in SBG practices, including the effects of varied home lives and prior knowledge. If she's so proof driven, where is her counter proof that traditional grading practices have a robust statistical analysis of pre- and post-implementation? It doesn't exist.

She dismisses my work and that of the large majority of assessment and grading experts as anecdotal and a fad education program, declaring that I somehow think students will magically become intrinsically motivated. This is the comment of someone who hasn't done her due diligence regarding the topic, dismissing something because she hasn't explored it deeply yet. Be clear: There's no magic here – It's hard work, much harder than the simplistic notion that letter grades motivate children.

Friesenborg diminishes the outstanding work of Daniel Pink, who's book *Drive*, is commonly accepted as well researched by those in leadership and education, and she does not mention the work of Vigotsky, Dweck, Bandura, Lavoie, Jensen, Marzano, Hattie, Reeves, Deci, Ripley, de Charms, Stipek and Seal, Southwick and Charney, Lawson and Guare whose collective works speak compellingly to the motivational, resilience-building elements found in standards-based grading. Is it because she is unaware of them, or is it because their studies would run counter to her claims? Here she is distorting the truth, not helping the community.

We DO have research on re-learning/assessing (see the names mentioned above), but it's very difficult to account for all the variables in the messy enterprise of learning and claim a clear causation. Some strategies work well because there's support at home, access to technology in the home, or a close relationship with an adult mentor, and some don't work because the child has none of those things. Sometimes we can infer a correlation in education research, but most of the time, good education research gives us helpful, new questions to ask, not absolute declarations of truth. When research does provide clear direction, we are careful still to vet implications thoughtfully, not dismiss what is inconvenient or doesn't fit our preconceived or politically motivated notions.

When we are anxious about our community's future, we want clear data points and solid facts, but teaching and learning are imperfect, messy systems, and we're still evolving our knowledge base. Many practices have stood the test of time, of course, but it's only a minority of them that have a strong research base. We can't cripple modern efforts by waiting for one, decisive research report to say, "Yay or Nay." At some point, we use the anecdotal evidence of the moment, asking teachers to be careful, reflective practitioners, and to welcome continued critique of practices in light of new perspective or evidence as it becomes available. If we're setting policy, we dive deeply into what *is* available in current thinking and research nationwide so our local decisions are informed.

In her letter, Friesenborg describes standards-based grading as, "radical." Please know that it is quite pervasive with thousands of schools across the country actively investigating how to implement it or who have already done so. Most states, in fact, are calling for competency-based learning and reporting to be implemented. Friesenborg states that the Iowa State Board of Education makes standards-based learning a legislative Advocacy Priority. This is a positive thing, and SBG practices promote exactly this. We want accurate reporting. That means we separate non-curriculum reports from the curriculum reports. It helps all of us do our jobs, and it provides more accurate tools for students to self-monitor how they are doing relative to academic goals.

Such grading practices are not even close to the definition of radical. Read the observations of schooling in Greece, Rome, Egypt, Babylonia, and on through the 1700's, the Renaissance, the 1800's, and the 1900's: Grades reporting what students have learned regarding their subjects was the predominant practice. There were separate reports of children's civility and work habits. That's what we're doing here with SBG, nothing else. It's dramatically more helpful than a grade that indicates a mishmash of, "Knowledge of Ecosystems, plus all the days he brought his supplies in a timely manner, used a quiet,

indoor voice, had his parents sign his reading log for the week, and brought in canned food for the canned food drive.” In no state in our country does it say, “Has a nice neat notebook” in the math curriculum. That’s because it’s not a math principle. It has no business obscuring the truth of our child’s math proficiency.

We have plenty of research, let alone anecdotal evidence, that reporting work habits in separate columns on the report card actually raises the importance of those habits in students’ minds, helping them mature more quickly in each area. The more curriculum we aggregate into one symbol, however, the less accurate and useful it is as a report for any one of the aggregated elements or as a tool of student maturation. SBG takes us closer to the fundamental elements of good teaching and learning.

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