

---

# 1

## Getting Started

**Y**ou are about to take on one of the most difficult and challenging tasks in modern education: *Developing a standards-based report card!* Why is this task so difficult and challenging? Because while just about everyone today agrees that report cards need improvement and that grades should be based on clear standards for student learning, rarely do they agree on what those report cards should contain or how they should be constructed.

Efforts to develop a standards-based report card usually begin with great excitement and enthusiasm. Those charged with the task are familiar with the many inadequacies of current reporting forms and recognize the need for improvement. Before long, however, most find themselves embroiled in controversy and stymied in their efforts. Numerous unanticipated difficulties emerge, and discussions about the report card turn into heated debates. After suffering a series of setbacks and defeats, many simply give up on the task and return to the traditional reporting forms they have always used. Others persist in their efforts and end up with a new form that no one really likes but a few staunchly oppose.

Why is there so much controversy about the report card, and why should revising it be so hard? Although many factors undoubtedly contribute to these disputes, in most cases, it comes down simply to different groups wanting different things.

- Parents want a report card that offers more precise information about how their children are doing in school, but they want that information to be understandable and useful.

- Teachers want a report card that matches recent changes in their curricula and classroom assessments, but they do not want a form that requires a lot of extra time and effort to complete.
- Administrators want more consistency in grading, but they fear imposing changes that will add to teachers' workload or infringe on teachers' academic freedom.
- All these groups want a report card that is meaningful to students and facilitates learning, but few know precisely how that can be achieved!

Besides different groups wanting different things, it is not unusual to find members of the same group disagreeing about the kinds of changes that should be made. Teachers, for example, vary widely in their grading policies and practices. While most try to assign grades that they believe are fair and equitable, research shows that teachers differ tremendously in the sources of evidence they consider in determining students' grades. They also differ in the procedures they use for weighting that evidence. Studies show further that these disparities exist even among teachers who teach the same subject at the same grade level in the same school (Brookhart, 1993, 1994; Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1996; Kain, 1996; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002)!

## **The Difficulty of Change**

Clashes in perspective over the simplest reporting issues complicate the change process even further. Take, for example, the question of how often report cards should be distributed. Parents consistently say that they want report cards sent home more often. Every nine weeks is okay, but every six weeks would be better. More frequent reports help parents keep abreast of their child's progress in school. They also make it easier for parents to identify any difficulties their child may be experiencing so that immediate steps can be taken to remedy the problem (J. F. Wemette, personal communication relating the results of a parent survey on grading conducted by the North St. Paul–Maplewood–Oakdale Independent School District, MN, 1994).

Teachers, on the other hand, consistently argue for less frequent report cards. Every 9 weeks is okay, but every 12 weeks would be better. Teachers point out that completing report cards requires a lot of time and detracts from their instructional planning. The more time they spend recording grades and marks, the less time they have to design lessons and gather teaching materials. Some teachers also feel

uncomfortable assigning grades based on information gathered over shorter periods (Barnes, 1985; Lomax, 1996).

Tradition further hampers change efforts. Despite tremendous advances in our knowledge of effective grading and reporting (see Allen, 2005; Brookhart, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Haladyna, 1999; Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2009), report cards have remained largely unaffected. Especially at the secondary level, today's report cards look much like they did a century ago, listing a single grade or mark for each subject studied or each course taken (see Baron, 2000; Guskey, 2006b). The only significant change is that computers print report cards today while in years past, teachers filled them out by hand. We continue using these forms not because they have proven effective but simply because "we've always done it that way." Even parents dissatisfied with report cards can take some comfort in seeing a form that looks much like the one they received when they were students, two or three decades ago.

### **"WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THAT WAY!"**

Once upon a time, a newlywed couple was preparing an evening meal of ham and potatoes. Before putting the ham in the pot for heating, the wife dutifully cut off the end of the ham, bone and all. Her new husband looked up from peeling the potatoes and asked why she did this, for it seemed to him that the practice wasted a lot of good ham. She replied, "My mother always did it that way."

"Does it make the ham taste better?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied the wife. "In my family, we've always done it that way."

Perplexed by this tradition, the husband set out to discover why his new wife's family cut off the end of the ham before cooking. So at the next family gathering, he asked his mother-in-law about the practice.

"My mother always did it that way," she answered.

"Does it affect the taste? Is it for health reasons?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied the mother-in-law. "In our family, we've always done it that way. Why don't you ask my mother?"

Continuing his inquiry, the husband next approached his wife's grandmother and asked her why she cut off the end of the ham before heating.

"When I first married," explained the grandmother, "we were very poor and owned little cookware. We had only one small pot. I cut off the end of the ham so that it would fit into our small pot."

"And do you still do that today?" asked the young man.

"Why no!" replied the grandmother. "I haven't done that for years. You waste a lot of good ham if you do."

Often in grading, we do much the same. We continue to use old policies and practices, not because of their proven merit but simply because "we've always done it that way" and never asked "why?"

Another factor that stifles report card change is that few educators have any formal training in grading and reporting. Nothing in their undergraduate preparation or professional development experiences gave them good information about effective grading and reporting practices (Allen & Lambating, 2001, Schafer, 1991). As a result, most have little understanding of the different reporting methods, the effects of different grading policies, or the advantages and shortcomings of different reporting forms (Stiggins, 1991, 1993, 1999). What knowledge they have is based on what was done to them: the grading policies and practices used by their teachers (see Guskey, 2006b). So even educators dissatisfied with their current report card typically lack clear direction in their improvement efforts.

Finally, as with so many aspects of education currently being “reformed,” changing the report card often seems an added and unnecessary burden. Educators are working hard to articulate standards for student learning, define appropriate levels of student performance based on those standards, adapt instruction to help students with diverse learning needs meet those standards, and develop assessments to measure students’ proficiency. The time required for this work and the complexity of the tasks involved make it exceedingly difficult to take on the additional challenge of revising the report card.

#### FACTORS THAT HINDER REPORT CARD CHANGE

1. Different groups want different things from the report card.
2. Report cards are based on tradition.
3. Educators have little formal training in grading and reporting.
4. Current demands for change in curriculum, instruction, and assessments seem more pressing than report card change.

### The Need for Change

So with all these factors hindering efforts to change the report card, why take on this daunting task? We believe that there are three important reasons for making this change and for making it *right now*. First, a lot of current grading and reporting policies and practices are shamefully inadequate. We persist in using these ineffective practices and antiquated reporting forms simply because we have never

thought deeply about the consequences of their many shortcomings and limitations. In working with educators to address these issues, however, we find that relatively small changes in grading practices and reporting forms can yield huge benefits for students, parents, and teachers alike. Modest, thoughtful adaptations can result in a multitude of important advantages for all groups involved.

Second, most report cards today are dreadfully misaligned with current reforms in teaching and learning. In recent years, educators have made great strides in developing standards for learning that clarify what they want students to know and be able to do. They also have created better and more authentic forms of assessment to measure students' proficiencies based on those standards. The one element not aligned with these important advances is the report card—the primary tool used to describe students' learning progress and achievement to parents and others.

Third, thoughtful and well-informed initiatives to develop new reporting forms frequently prompt discussions about other elements of schooling, which can be vitally important to students' success. When educators begin talking about what to report and how to report it, they also begin thinking about the clarity of state or district learning standards, the effectiveness of their instructional strategies, and the quality of their classroom assessments. In addition, they often become more conscientious about helping students learn well, earn high grades or marks, and gain confidence in learning situations.

Today we know more than ever before about effective grading and reporting practices. We have better information about what works and helps students and about what does not work and can even be potentially harmful. This knowledge base offers explicit direction for change efforts and provides guidance for making improvements. It also convinces us that we cannot wait any longer to put this knowledge into practice. For the sake of our students, improvements in grading practices and reporting forms are not just needed—they are imperative.

### REASONS FOR CHANGING THE REPORT CARD

1. Many current grading practices and reporting forms are shamefully inadequate.
2. Report cards are misaligned with current reforms in teaching and learning.
3. Report card development often leads to a critical examination of standards, instructional goals, and assessments.

## Why Standards Instead of Letter Grades?

Occasionally parents express skepticism about standards-based report cards. They believe that a traditional letter grade or percentage grade for each subject area on the report card works just fine, and they see no reason to change. Parents also understand letter grades, or at least believe that they do, because letter grades were used when they were in school. In addition, since most colleges and universities use letter grades and will probably continue to do so, parents want their children to become accustomed to letter grade systems so that they can successfully navigate within such systems when they reach that level.

As part of their improvement efforts, educators need to pay special attention to helping these parents understand the problems associated with traditional letter grades, as well as the benefits of moving to a standards-based system. Specifically, they need to help parents understand that when teachers assign a single letter grade or percentage to students for each subject studied or each course taken, they must combine many diverse sources of evidence into that one mark. This results in what researchers refer to as a “hodgepodge grade” that includes elements of achievement, attitude, effort, and behavior (Cizek et al., 1996; McMillan, 2001; McMillan et al., 2002). Even when teachers clarify the weighting strategies they use to combine these elements and employ computerized grading programs to ensure accuracy in their computations, the final grade remains a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret and rarely presents a true picture of a student’s academic proficiency (Brookhart, 1991, Cross & Frary, 1996; Guskey, 2002a). Researchers also contend that inclusion of these nonacademic factors in determining students’ grades is responsible, at least in part, for the discrepancies frequently noted between students’ grades and the students’ performance on large-scale accountability assessments (Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross, & Siperstein, 2001, D’Agostino & Welsh, 2007; Guskey, 2006c; Welsh & D’Agostino, 2009).

This is not to imply that students’ effort, responsibility, participation, punctuality, and other work habits are unimportant. Clearly they are. Teachers at all levels generally recognize the value of offering students, as well as parents, specific feedback on the adequacy of performance in these areas. A standards-based report card allows teachers to do precisely that by reporting on these nonacademic elements *separately*. As such, it provides parents with a clearer and more detailed picture of their child’s academic performance in school along with information on other important school-related behaviors.

Furthermore, a standards-based report card breaks down each subject area or course into specific elements of learning. The “standards” within each subject area offer parents a more thorough description of their child’s achievement. A single grade of C, for example, might mean a modest level of performance on each of five different learning goals or excellent performance on three goals but dismal performance on two others. Without the breakdown that standards-based reporting offers, this difference would be obscured. Standards-based grading provides a more comprehensive picture of students’ academic progress by identifying specific areas of strength, as well as areas where additional work may be needed. It thus facilitates collaboration between parents and educators in their efforts to help students improve their performance.

As far as preparing students for colleges and universities, clearly the best preparation that any school can offer is to engage students in a rigorous and challenging curriculum and then do all that is possible to guarantee that students learn excellently what that curriculum includes. A standards-based report card identifies the specific learning goals within the curriculum so that appropriate rigor can be ensured. It also communicates more detailed information about student learning progress with regard to those goals to bring about higher levels of success. These distinct benefits serve to prepare students well, no matter what type of learning environment they enter after they leave school.

## Guiding Premises

Before going forward in our discussion of how successfully to develop standards-based report cards, we need to clarify the premises that guide our work in this area. We will return to these premises frequently in later chapters because they provide the basis for many of the recommendations we offer. Our guiding premises include the following:

1. *Developing a standards-based report card is primarily a challenge in effective communication.* Regardless of the education level, the report card’s purpose is to provide high-quality information to interested persons in a form they can understand and use. Rather than simply documenting student progress and quantifying achievement, the report card should communicate clear and unambiguous information about students’ performance to parents, students, and others.

2. *Accurate interpretation is the key element in effective communication.* If parents and others cannot make sense of the information included in a report card, *it is not their fault.* Educators must design the report card to ensure that those who receive it understand the information it includes and find that information both helpful and meaningful.
3. *Consistency is essential to accurate interpretation.* Educators often use different words interchangeably to describe the same or similar concepts. This often results in unintended confusion and miscommunication. For example, most parents have difficulty distinguishing *achievement, competency, mastery, and proficiency.* Similarly, parents rarely understand how *standards, proficiencies, goals, and objectives* differ. In developing report cards, consistent terminology across subject areas and school levels greatly improves the clarity of communication and the accuracy of interpretations.
4. *Developing a successful report card involves a series of trade-offs.* Educators frequently try to accomplish too much with the report card and end up accomplishing very little. Simply put, no single reporting form can adequately serve all of educators' diverse communication needs. Success hinges, therefore, on recognizing the limitations of the report card and seeing it as part of a larger, multifaceted reporting system. Such a reporting system communicates multiple types of information to multiple audiences in different formats (see Guskey & Bailey, 2001).
5. *Report cards should be descriptive, not restrictive.* Regardless of its form, a report card should never limit or regulate teachers' instructional practices. Nor should it ever narrow or constrain the means teachers use to communicate with parents or others. As a communication tool, the report card should always serve to enhance teaching and learning, never to hamper or interfere with the process in any way.
6. *No report card is perfect.* Like instructional practices, the effectiveness of a report card depends largely on context. What works best in one school, with a particular group of educators who serve a particular group of students who come from a particular community, may not work equally well in another school. Success depends on appropriate adaptation to these contextual differences. So while we include lots of examples of report cards and reporting forms in this book, none should be considered an exemplary model. Instead, each should be taken



as one way, among many others, of meeting an important communication challenge.

7. *Developing a standards-based report card requires teamwork, broad involvement, and initial training or study.* We frequently ask school district leaders, “Who makes up the team charged with revising the report card?” and just as frequently their reply is, “Teachers and administrators from several schools and grade levels.” But if the purpose of the report card is to communicate information about student learning primarily to parents and students, then two key groups are missing from the development team. In addition, development activities should be guided by our established knowledge base on standards-based grading and reporting, not by personal opinion or intuition. Therefore, teams charged with revising the reporting form should do extensive background reading and, if possible, participate in group training. Such training should be targeted at providing specific information on what works and what procedures are most likely to result in successful report card development and implementation.

These seven premises guide our work in developing standards-based report cards and shape our vision of what we hope this book will accomplish. They also provide the foundation from which we will address other critical issues. We encourage readers to keep these premises in mind as they consider each of the topics presented and each of the recommendations offered.

### GUIDING PREMISES IN DEVELOPING STANDARDS-BASED REPORT CARDS

1. Developing a standards-based report card is primarily a challenge in effective communication.
2. Accurate interpretation is the key element in effective communication.
3. Consistency is essential to accurate interpretation.
4. Developing a successful report card involves a series of trade-offs.
5. Report cards should be descriptive, not restrictive.
6. No report card is perfect.
7. Developing a standards-based report card requires teamwork, broad involvement, and initial training or study.

## **Our Purpose**

We prepared this book so that educators involved in the complicated work of developing standards-based report cards would have a coherent and logical framework from which to approach this challenging task. Since our primary focus is standards-based grading and reporting at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, we consider school leaders and teachers at these levels to be our primary audience. As part of their professional responsibilities, these educators must collect evidence on student achievement and performance, evaluate that evidence, and then communicate the results of their evaluations to others through a variety of means, report cards being the most obvious. We also recognize, however, that many others have important roles in this process as well, including parents, district administrators, community members, and students themselves. Thus, these groups represent important audiences for this work, too.

We hope that the framework described in these pages helps these diverse groups develop a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of the various aspects of grading and reporting. We also hope that it helps clarify the challenges involved in revising the report card or in developing an entirely new form. The context-specific nature of these challenges makes it impossible to recommend a single set of “best” policies and practices or even to present what we might consider an “ideal” report card. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that having a practical framework for approaching these development challenges will result in better, more meaningful, and more educationally sound report cards that benefit everyone.

## **Our Organizational Scheme**

We have organized this book based on what we believe to be the essential steps involved in developing an effective standards-based report card. These steps relate to the issues that we believe are most crucial in the development process but also the most troublesome.

In Chapters 2 and 3, we focus on defining essential terms and purposes. We describe the importance of defining standards and explaining the purpose of standards-based reporting. Although a lot of excellent work has been done in recent years to articulate standards for student learning, reporting students’ progress and achievement based on standards requires new perspectives and a new orientation.

Next, in Chapters 4 through 7, we turn to a series of crucial questions that need to be addressed in the process of developing standards-based report cards. We stress that while there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, the consequences of the decisions made at each step will have profound implications for everything that follows. For this reason, consensus must be sought at each step so that successful progress can be maintained. Some of these decisions are relatively straightforward, such as how often report cards will be completed and sent home. Others are much more complicated. For example, deciding what specific standards will be included on the report card and what labels will be used to describe different levels of student performance is likely to require lengthy discussion. We also will look at the distinctive conditions of reporting on the performance of students with special needs and those with exceptional talents and abilities.

Finally, in Chapters 8 and 9, we turn to the process of piloting and revising newly developed reporting forms and procedures for building a unified reporting system. The report card represents but one of a variety of useful tools for communicating information about student progress and achievement to parents and to others. Success in implementing a standards-based report card often depends on how well the report card is integrated within that comprehensive reporting system. So in this section, we offer specific suggestions for ensuring that successful integration.

Obviously, the issues considered in these pages are highly diverse. Our intent in addressing this broad array of issues is not to offer a comprehensive treatise on grading and reporting student learning. Rather, we hope to provide a thoughtful analysis of the most basic issues that need to be considered in successfully developing and implementing standards-based report cards.

In our work with schools across the United States and Canada and in Europe, Asia, and Australia, we have seen several highly successful efforts to develop standards-based report cards, along with numerous failures. We also have seen widely varied schools and school systems encounter many of the same dilemmas and pitfalls. In this book, we address those dilemmas and problems head-on in hopes of helping more schools and school systems succeed. We believe that approaching the change process with deliberateness, thoughtfulness, honesty, and a sense of fairness to all can lead to lasting improvements. The key to success, however, rests in maintaining a laserlike focus on effective communication and the clear intention of all educators to enhance student learning.

## Our Hope

The issues involved in grading and reporting are far too diverse and much too complex to be addressed with simple ideas or strategies. Success depends largely on the ability of educators to approach the process with sensitivity, understanding, and a true sense of purpose. Our intent, therefore, is not to offer “the one correct way” to develop a standards-based report card. Rather, we hope to show that thoughtfully planned development efforts can succeed in any context and that specific and practical ideas are available for achieving such success.

To serve that purpose, we hope this book does not just sit on someone’s office bookshelf or in a professional library. Instead, we would like to see it passed around among educators, used and reused, analyzed and debated. We hope it finds its way into undergraduate education courses to help those preparing to become teachers develop a deeper understanding of grading and reporting issues. It might even become the focus of study groups and faculty retreats where the ideas we present are questioned and discussed. We would like to find well-worn, coffee-stained copies of the book in teachers’ lounges, with dog-eared pages and notes scribbled in the margins, where it becomes the basis for brief conversations and extended planning sessions.

We also hope readers will take an active, reflective, and perhaps even skeptical approach to the ideas we present. As a result, we hope it stimulates further inquiry and purposeful action. Most important, we hope this book prompts the development of better standards-based report cards that school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and others consider true models of effective communication.