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THE REFORM AND INFLUENCE OF STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
LEAH HECK

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

MAY 2021

BETHEL UNIVERSITY

THE REFORM AND INFLUENCE OF STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS

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May 2021

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Abstract

Standards-based grading is being utilized in many secondary schools across the United States.

Research shows that there are many benefits that students are afforded, such as the ability to have a more personalized learning approach, be provided accommodations and modifications to show mastery within the standards, and have the ability to show more academic achievement in a rigorous environment. As educators make the change to standards-based grading they are also met with many challenges, which include ensuring parents and students are aware of why the change is necessary, as well as putting in the time, effort to train teachers accordingly and to justify the monetary costs associated with making such a change. Parents, students, and educators have expressed their concerns when grading in this manner, but many have experienced a positive impact on students' ability to learn and the increased motivation they have towards learning.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Standards are customary in most lines of work. Standards are used to hold people accountable for their actions and job performance and they are also used to give feedback on job performance. Standards are not a new concept in the professional world. They are definitely not “new” in the educational world either. Standardized tests have become a huge part of a child’s educational journey. Students take standardized tests at both the state and national levels. Students are encouraged to take either the ACT or SAT as a college-entrance exam, with 1,666,017 students taking the ACT in 2013 and 1,664,479 taking the SAT that same year, twelve states are now requiring juniors to take the ACT as a graduation standard (Lewin, 2013). As standardized tests become increasingly crucial to a child’s educational future, educators are looking at how best to prepare students for these high-stakes tests. As the push to prepare students for these tests increases, educators now recognize that there is a disconnect between these tests and the curriculum in content areas. Thus, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers created a common core set of standards for both mathematics and language arts at each grade level. “These standards describe what students are expected to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school” (Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2010, p. 2).

The Common Core National Standards have been adopted by 46 states. Educators across the country are now able to assess students using the same standards in preparing students for college and careers (Achieve, 2013). Most states adopted both the English language arts and math common core standards, but some states only included parts of the Common Core, such as Minnesota, which only adopted the English standards but not the math standards. Now that the states’ educational leaders have decided to engage in these national standards, it is up to the

districts, schools, and teachers to decide just how they want to measure their students' knowledge, skills, and abilities against these standards and answer: "What does it look like to master these standards?"

Teachers are being tasked to create a curriculum that aligns with these standards and to answer this question. They are also being asked to analyze their grading practices, as mastery of content and knowledge of these standards does not reflect how many teachers have traditionally graded in the past. Teachers are looking at their past grading practices to determine the validity of incorporating late work, behavior, retakes, and homework in general when entering a grade. Standards-based grading asks educators to ensure that a student's grade is a true representation of what they know and are able to do. Guskey and Bailey (2010) noted that the use of standards is the goal of teaching and learning. Defining goals is not new to education. In the 1940s educators asked themselves "what do we want students to learn and be able to do?" and "what evidence would we accept to verify that learning?" (Guskey & Bailey, 2010, p. 15). These are the same questions that educators are asking today in a standards-based approach. Therefore, past grading practices such as penalizing students for lateness, or dropping a grade for poor behavior, are not standard practice with this approach.

Teachers are also being asked to work more closely with each other to gather and share data to help all students in their growth and learning to meet these standards. The professional learning communities within schools are working tirelessly to help their students in the "mastery" of these standards, so they can gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their future. New vocabulary has become a part of the daily routine in schools to reflect this change in grading. Formative and summative work are the staples of this change and are a part of the vocabulary for teachers and students alike. Teachers are also tasked with giving more structured

feedback that allows a student and their parents to see where they are at using the standards as measurement.

With any change, there will be some pushback. Some educators are resistant to making these changes. Parents are confused because this is not the way that they were taught. Even some students are hesitant to this change because they cannot simply “play” school anymore, they need to demonstrate levels of competency in each of the standards that are assessed. Even with the pushback, more and more educators are looking to make these changes to assessing students at a standards-based level, which is really revolutionizing how students are being assessed, and educational leaders are also pushing their districts and teachers to become agreeable with this educational reform (Scriffiny, 2008).

Standards-Based Grading in Secondary Classrooms

There are many complexities when it comes to a grade. Those complexities include asking just what is a grade, as well as asking what meaning it has. Past grading practices have led to more of those complexities: Is one teacher’s “A” easier than the other teacher’s “A”? Do homework and late work affect the grade? Overall, though, grades are important indicators that are used to help with college and career readiness. They tell students and their families if that student is prepared for what is ahead. A grade should be reflective of what a student knows and is able to do. Thus standards-based grading is a natural fit. Standards-based grading is used to inform students where they are at in the mastery of content, and when accompanied with suggestions for improving, these grades have far more value (Guskey 2006).

Standards-based grading communicates the mastery of content, whereas traditional grading practices can focus on non-standards-based criteria, such as: practice, neatness, organization, attendance, behavior, and other non-academic factors. A grade should be reflective

of the student's overall achievement in the understanding of content. Hypothetically, you would not judge a ballplayer or actress on their practices, just the actual game or performance.

Standards-based grading does not judge a student on their practice of learning. It allows the teacher to assess a student when they are ready to demonstrate their mastery of the standards in their course, such as with a test, paper, or project.

According to Spencer (2012), standards-based grading “derives from the idea that a teacher ought to have clearly defined academic goals for their students, be able to determine if they've met them, and then communicate that to students and parents” (p. 5). When a teacher is assessing a student, they will label that assessment with the standard or benchmark (Example: Identify Theme) instead of with a meaningless number or story name (Example: Quiz 3.4 or “The Veldt”). Students and parents then will know exactly how well that student can understand or demonstrate that skill. If a student did poorly on a skill or standard, they can easily work with their teacher to determine an alternative to show more mastery of that skill or standard. “Standards-based grading is based on the principle that grades should convey how well students have achieved standards. In other words, grades are not about what students earn; they are about what students learn” (Brookhart, 2011, p 12).

This change in grading allows for better communication with the student, as well as with parents. At parent-teacher conferences, teachers can clearly communicate with parents about the skills and standards that their student has demonstrated to them. This will allow parents to know if their students are strong or weak in a subject, and how they may be able to help their students. The gradebook becomes a more efficient communication tool with standards-based grading. It also takes the attention off of arbitrary points and focuses on the learning of concepts and skills, rather than how many more points are needed to get an “A.”

Although communication about a student's grade is made easier with standards-based grading, the perception of what a grade indicates and how to understand the grade needs to be communicated to both students and parents. Schools need to educate parents on the reasons behind the change in grading, and many need to assist parents in learning how to read their student's grade reports. The standards-based report card would deliver more detailed and specific information on the student's skills and content mastery, and it would be less open to interpretation.

Standards-based grading assesses all students on the exact same standards for that given content. This allows teachers to work together to plan and create lessons and assessments that show the same skills and knowledge. No longer is it up to teachers to curve or weight grades using points. Common standards-based grading practice uses descriptors (Example: Advanced, Mastery, Basic, Not Yet) in place of percentages and points and unifies them with traditional letter grades. These descriptors show that a student who earns a "C" is at the basic level and skills for a standard, a "B" is mastery of the complex skills in a standard, and an "A" shows advanced understanding of that standard. Teachers assess students using the same descriptors for the same standards, which allows a more uniform approach, and is fairer to students.

Another facet of standards-based grading is the use of formative and summative work. Formative work indicates that it is practice and is part of the development of a student. Formative work usually includes homework, daily reading, quizzes, and some classwork, and summative work shows a summary and summation of the skills and knowledge that a student is able to demonstrate. These typically include a formal test, paper, or project. A student's grade in a traditional grading system is usually made up of points from three categories: homework/classwork, tests/quizzes, papers/projects. Depending on how a teacher weighted

those categories sometimes students' skills and knowledge were not accurately represented through the points and weights of such categories. Standards-based grading reflects only what a student knows and is able to do based on the national standards that have been set not on the arbitrary points that have been given to a certain assignment or project. In Ken O'Connor's (2009) book *How to Grade for Learning*, he noted that homework is essential for learning but it should not be included in the grade. Students need not be penalized for missing assignments if they understand and can demonstrate mastery of the material in other assessments.

O'Connor also communicates in his book that learning sometimes needs to allow for multiple attempts to show mastery and skill as students are assessed in these standards. "Every student should have the opportunity to practice without penalty" noted teachers Deddeh, Main, and Fulkerson (2010, pg 54). These educators worked to institute standards-based grading in their own classrooms and then brought the concept to others in their district. The idea that students have multiple opportunities to show growth is something that they made sure to include in their presentation to their district and aligns well with what O'Connor and other scholars on the subject of grading reform have also stated, that students should have multiple chances to demonstrate mastery of a concept or standard.

Standards-based grading also looks closer at the standards and achievement levels required of struggling learners. If utilized accurately, educators can differentiate in order to help all students achieve the levels required of them in any subject. Standards do not look at a student's socioeconomic status, learning disabilities, or other underlying factors which may affect a student's ability to get a "good" grade in a traditional grading model. Standards are clearly written for everyone to be able to achieve, regardless of any of those other underlying factors that affect so many students. Plus each subject will have its own complexities in the

demonstration and mastery of their content (Cox, 2011). Assessments will look very different in a math class compared to a social studies class. But, as long as the standards are the same across the board, the system of standards-based grading, if implemented and done correctly, should work for everyone and every subject.

Guiding Questions

The nationwide push and reform for educators to teach to the same standards across the country indicates that a change is necessary for the grading and reporting of these standards. No longer can traditional grading practices be used to report what a student knows about the content of a course. The differentiation accessible through a standards-based grading model allows more flexibility for the student to show mastery of a skill. It also changes the motivation of students, who now have to take more ownership in their learning. The invaluable intrinsic motivation is a tremendous reason to institute a standards-based grading model. This model does bring about a challenge for teachers, who must go against the “status quo” of how they were taught and assessed as students themselves. The guiding questions that will be explored in this thesis are:

GQ1: How does standards-based grading bring about reform to instructional practices in secondary classrooms?

GQ2: How does standards-based grading influence student learning?

Definition of Terms

Here are the most commonly-used definitions in this paper.

Standards-based grading: Townsley (2019) defined standards-based grading as a way to separate academic content from non-academic factors to report student progress towards course or grade-level standards.

Traditional grading: Zimmerman (2020) defined a traditional grading system as one that utilizes a points-based system which includes points for homework, quizzes, and exams. Townsley (2019) also reports that factors such as effort, participation, and even extra credit are also found in most traditionally based grading systems.

Differentiation: Lawrence-Brown (2004) noted that differentiation has two goals. The first is to “maximize attainment of the grade-level general curriculum standards” (p. 38) which requires educators to provide varied support for their struggling students. She explains that this requires the second goal which is “to provide adapted curricula for students who need it” (p. 38).

Personalized Learning: Twyman (2014) defined personalized learning as an “approach that respects individual student differences and supports students in the mastery of standards and aligned competencies” (p. 8). This is accomplished by teachers tailoring their student’s learning preferences in what and how they want to learn content and incorporating specific interests of their various learners for the course objectives, content, and by utilizing multiple instructional methods.

Exceptional Learners: Jung and Guskey (2011) classified struggling learners as “exceptional learners” (p. 34), estimated to be about 20% of the student population. The students who they note are typically their struggling learners include students with diagnosed disabilities, English language learners, and “any other students who, for reasons known or unknown, fall significantly behind their peers in mastering essential skills” (p. 34).

Chapter Summary

“If your grading system doesn’t guide students toward excellence, it’s time for something completely different” (Scriffiny, 2008, p 70). With the nationwide push for standards that are preparing students for career and college readiness, a new grading model is needed. Traditional

grading models do not assess at the standard. Most traditional models allow students to get by with little demonstration of mastering the content of these nationwide standards. If students are to be truly prepared for college and career, they need to be ready to learn and be excited about it. They don't need to simply memorize facts or complete homework haphazardly, which was usually required of them in traditional grading models. Additionally, the traditional model favored students who were able to "play" school, and did little to help those students with exceptional needs. Students who can demonstrate their abilities and take charge and ownership of their learning will find more success at college and in their careers.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The process of locating literature to be included in this thesis required searches using ERIC, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO MegaFILE, and ProQuest Education Journals. The parameters for the following review of the literature included reviewing sources from 2001-2021, focusing on the most recent sources. The keyword searches included:

“standards-based grading,” “standards-based instruction,” “alternative grading practices,” “personalized learning,” “grading for learning,” “grading reform,” and “student motivation.”

This chapter is structured to review the literature surrounding standards-based grading. The order of these sections is as follows: Overview of American Education Reforms, Reform in Grading Practices, Benefits of Standards-Based Grading, Challenges of Standards-Based Grading, and Standards-Based Grading’s Impact on Students.

Overview of American Educational Reforms

With the growing concern that graduates with an American education are unprepared for the “rigors” of university and careers, as well as the gap that exists between American students and those in other countries. Many of the states in the U.S. have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which are designed with learning targets to improve and allow for quality instruction in each classroom (Spencer, 2012). With the push towards these standards, it has become apparent that in order to report students’ progress and the measuring of growth the grading practices needed to match these standards (Peters et al., 2017). As educators work to have their students meet the standards of achievement that have been established, the system in which the students complete their work must be fair and clear so they know how to meet the different levels of achievement in any one standard.

In past practices, evaluation rubrics and grading practices have hindered students from showing what they know and are capable of with the “changing expectations” which vary by educator. Townsley (2019) stated that most traditional grading practices were incompatible with learning, since they were often reporting factors of effort and participation, rather than communicating what a student has learned and therefore clearly indicating what a students’ grade meant. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) have noted that the Common Core State Standards work to clarify student learning goals, but “traditional grading practices are not advanced enough to accurately communicate student achievement relative to those standards and instead often distort reporting due to grade inflation or deflation” (p. 1). By utilizing the standards, teachers' instructional and grading practices can be more clear and fair for each child, and every party, students, parents, administrators, will be able to understand where the child is at in their educational growth (Iamarino, 2014).

The implementation of using a standards-based grading model has been in effect for many schools in recent years. Townsley et al. (2019) noted that many schools who participated in the initial wave of adopting standards-based grading practices faced “significant challenges,” and have wondered if other school leaders would see their “inherent and insurmountable challenges” (pp. 281-282) as a hindrance in wanting to adopt a standards-based approach for grading reform in their own schools. Even with the skepticism of some, Townsley et al. (2019) showed that a new wave of standards-based grading was “on the horizon” (p. 295).

Educators are also wanting to take part in grading reform as they are noticing the inequities that traditional grading models perpetuate. Traditional grading practices were put in place to increase production and efficiency as schools became much larger in the early 20th century. Many of those practices allowed teachers to grade students on behaviors, which is

susceptible to bias (Feldman, 2019). With the adoption of a standards-based grading approach, judgment is not left solely on the teacher. “Educators must strive to ensure that the procedures they use in assigning grades or marks to student’s work are explicit, clear, and as objective as possible” (Guskey, 2006, p. 13). A student’s grade should be solely based on what a student can show you they know or on what they can do, which makes a standards-based grading practice more fair and equitable for all.

Reform in Grading Practices

Grading has been a hindrance for many years in creating positive student-teacher relationships and therefore has been a topic of interest for quite some time. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) reported that teachers and school leaders are looking for ways to create an accurate assessment system that promotes and certifies student learning, links what is being taught with what students learn, and creates more well-being for that student-teacher relationship. This means that many are adopting the philosophy of standards-based grading as it works to separate “learning goals and work habits, repurposing homework as practice, and emphasizing more recent evidence of learning rather than averaging multiple attempts” (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020, p. 2-3). This reform in grading practices is occurring now as Jung and Guskey (2011) have articulated that “most current grading practices are grounded in tradition, rather than research or best practice” (p. 32). Many of the issues with grading practices have to do with the training, or lack thereof, that teachers received. In most cases, teachers have been greatly influenced in their grading practice based on how they themselves were graded in their own experience as a student. Teachers must ensure that their personal opinions and experiences with being graded themselves do not influence how they grade their students (Guskey, 2006). Because of the biases that teachers have, usually based on their own

experiences, this has shown that “grades have not been reliable indicators of what students know and are able to do” (Jung & Guskey 2011).

Kohn (2011) emphasized that educators need to focus more on the bigger picture for students, and argues that students would be better off without being graded. He noted that many educators and researchers have known about the issues with grading for some time, but little progress has been made in acting on this issue with grading until now. In his discovery he found three conclusions for the research conducted studying past grading practices which included:

- “Grades tend to diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning
- Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task
- Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking” (pp. 28-30).

These reasons alone suggest that something needs to be done to better prepare students for success after high school. Kohn (2011) even commented further, adding that students feel as if “success matters more than learning”(p. 30) because their parents are usually more focused on the grade their student receives versus what they have learned, therefore influencing the student to feel the same way.

When Vanhala (2020) was looking at her past grading practices she found it very difficult to explain why her students who had perfect homework grades still did not seem to understand the content in her course. Zimmerman (2020) also noted the same issue in her courses, but argued that it is her students' behaviors that have led to this struggle. She found this issue to be even more prevalent when using a traditional grading structure, as it is not common practice for students to be able to get a “second chance” for quizzes and exams; part of that is due to time constraints. With grades being unreliable, incomplete, or inaccurate measures to communicate

students capabilities and the mismanagement of instructional time and resources, Hockbein and Pollio (2016) believe that standards-based grading can provide a more consistent measurement and give meaning to a student's grade, which would not only benefit the student but also the school. With the use of a standards-based grading model, instructional time could be better utilized and students would have more opportunities to get a clear grasp of content and show mastery in their understanding. A student needs to be able to have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know "because learning does not always take place on a predetermined schedule, it's important to value what students learn, regardless of when they learn it " (Townsley, 2014, p. 69). Brookhart (2011) described standards-based grading as a system designed to communicate how well students have *learned* the standards rather than using a traditional grading system which often captures what students have *earned* through homework completion, extra credit, and effort/participation points.

The Common Core State Standards have worked to clarify the goals that students should be able to obtain, but because the traditional grading practices are not usually advanced enough to communicate a student's achievement in each standard their grade is typically distorted because of the traditional method (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020) This is why there is a desire to find a way to grade students more equitably, therefore the push for creating a standards-based approach to grading. "Standards-based grading concerns itself with the cohesive body of knowledge that the student gains as a result of the course" (Iamarino, 2014). Rather than using scores from different learning points in the course and averaging them, a grade looks at the "final result" of the students' course work. This is made up of formative practice work, which is typically not graded and only used for feedback to see if a student has the tools and skills

necessary to be successful, and summative assessments used to make a final assessment of where a student's learning concluded at in the course (Iamarino, 2014).

At Deddeh et al.'s (2010) school in Michigan, they looked at what the benefits were to adopting a standards-based approach in their school system. One of the main takeaways they focused on, was the ability for students to get another chance to show and demonstrate their mastery in the standard, which they did not have the ability to do so in a traditional setting. Traditionally a student's poor score on a first attempt would still negatively impact their grade; this doesn't happen in a standards-based model. Since the student is so focused on the grade, and past practice didn't necessarily provide insight or feedback as to the meaning of this grade, this meant a student would have to seek a teacher out to get an explanation for what the grade means (Iamarino, 2014). A standards-based model has feedback as a featured part of the grading process so teacher and student are both clear as to where a student's learning is currently.

Iamarino (2014) pointed out that teachers can more accurately evaluate students' "abilities to think and write critically"(p. 2) and make more connections of their accomplishments in the classroom and how that connects to the outside world in a standards-based approach. With the standards being written out and broken down into student-friendly language, they can see how what they are learning applies to what they will need to do outside of the classroom. She also claimed that "standards-based grading takes aim both at the mediocrity in the classroom and in accurateness in the gradebook" (p. 2). While a standards-based approach makes learning a bit more connected to the outside world for students, allowing them to establish better goals for themselves, that equity and fairness are also shown in what a student actually knows what to do.

When Guskey et al. (2010) reviewed Kentucky's statewide approach to standards-based grading, they indicated that in this statewide model teachers looked at three different criteria for grading: product, process, and progress. The product was the achievement students gained, the process showed student's work habits, and progress showed the improvements students made over time. This clear indication on grade reports of the separate criteria gives a more clear and accurate representation of what a student knows and is capable of. This is consistent with other scholars that indicate "points" do not show the quality of work, rather they show "compliance", and a standards-based approach isn't looking for that (Iamarino, 2014).

Many college professors have noted that grade inflation in high school has led to an issue at colleges. This inflation typically comes from students knowing how to "play school" and get the most points vs. actually understanding the material and knowledge needed to be successful. Zimmerman (2020) found that instructors at her university were frustrated that students seemed to be more interested in getting their homework answers right for points, rather than actually learning the concepts for the course. Students see themselves as more of a "consumer vs learner" (Iamarino, 2014, p. 6) and expect high grades, which doesn't translate well once students have entered college. Guskey (2006) found that in his survey of college students nearly 70% felt they had negative experiences when being graded by their professors, due to unfair treatment and personal biases. This may be a reflection of the grade inflation they were used to receiving in their traditionally based grades in high schools, since they were not prepared for the learning strategies required at a collegiate level. Parents whose students have transitioned to a standards-based approach have noted that this form of evaluation is more similar to what they experience in their workplace, and feel that it better prepares their students for life after they leave school (Shippy et. al. 2013).

As more schools make the transition to a standards-based approach, Townsley et al. (2019) suggested that teachers get the training that is needed to make the changes necessary. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) agreed that when a school is looking to make the transition to a standards-based grading model, all members of the leadership team should meet to agree upon the purpose of grading before they tackle the specific policies and procedures. Also, other parties should be in agreement with what the purpose of a grade is, therefore students and parents need to be informed of why these changes are occurring, they need to be aware of how to work in such an environment, and they should be informed of what would remain the same in this new model.

Benefits of Standards-Based Grading

As educators decide on whether or not they should make the transition to a standards-based grading system in their classrooms and schools, they need to look at what are the benefits provided to students and to their instructional practices. The benefits that will be explored include: rigor, pacing, and achievement, personalized learning, and accommodations and modifications.

Rigor, Pacing & Achievement

Standards-based grading allows educators the opportunity to meet students where they are at. They can help students who are struggling and push those that are ready to extend their thinking. Each student can show their achievement in their learning, and the progress they have made in each standard. This is possible if teachers develop these three factors in creating their gradebook:

- Standards-based grades should have meaning, which includes separating achievement from non-academic factors such as effort, participation, behavior, and responsibility.

- Students should be provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding without penalty based on feedback to continue their learning in the classroom.
- The grade book should be independent of extraneous factors such as extra credit and homework completion and accuracy. Homework and other formative assessments should be viewed as opportunities for learners to practice and receive feedback and should have little to no impact on the learner's final grade (Townsley, 2019, p. 36).

By only allowing the learning to be present in a student's grade, standards-based grading allows students to show their achievement in learning the content for a course and gives them multiple opportunities to demonstrate their achievement.

Some may wonder if a standards-based approach makes getting a “high grade” or an “A” unattainable, but with the right approach, such as the one described above, students should all have the knowledge of what it takes to achieve a high grade in a standard. With students' ability to update their scores, based on reassessment they can go through the standards and see what content they understand, what they may need more work in, and then focus on standards they need to or want to improve upon (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Also with a standards-based approach, Deddeh et al. (2010) found that students with a “C” in a traditional grading model had much more variety in their standardized state test scores, 47-94%, while students using the standards-based model who had earned a “C” had state standardized test scores only ranged from 63-78%. This evidence shows that in this sample a “C” score was more indicative of what a student knows and can do. In the traditional model, it's hard to explain why a student with a 94% on a state test would have a “C” in class. Iamarino (2014) argues that “standards-based grading separates and elevates the advent of learning from points and numbers in a gradebook”

(pg 9). When standards are used to grade a student, it focuses on the learning that the student was able to achieve, rather than telling you that that student knows how to “play school.”

In regards to pacing, many issues come with a more personalized approach, which standards-based grading supports. In a traditional model, most practice work is issued a point value, and then the teacher moves on. The student has to seek their own feedback from the teacher to learn what they missed, but many students do not seek out this information (Iamarino, 2014). With a standards-based model, practice/formative work is not typically assigned a grade, it is used to provide feedback to students so they know what it is they still need to work on, or the ways in which they can enhance their learning and challenge themselves. This feedback is used to help students improve or enrich their learning to prepare for the summative (O’Connor, 2009). Therefore, a student's grade then shows a “final result of their learning rather than a ‘summation’ of grades” (Iamarino, 2014, p. 1) that they earned from the marking period.

The feedback that is provided to students also allows teachers to see where their students need more help. If re-teaching needs to occur, small group learning or other strategies need to be implemented. They now can see more of where students are lacking and what problems with the material they may have, or if more enrichment opportunities are needed for students who are clearly understanding the material. In her article on the benefits of standards-based grading, Iamarino (2014) quoted two English teachers with saying they can, “catch and correct problems as they occur” which allows students the ability to get more help along the way, but also for teachers to maybe “nudge” (p. 4) a student into more help, because they are more aware of issues along the way. Marzano and Heflebower (2011) also discussed that the classroom can look different in this approach as students work together formally or informally, to understand content or teach it to each other.

Dr. J. Rickabaugh, the director for the Institute of Personalized Learning in Milwaukee, WI, worried that our current educational system is designed to make students dependent on the teacher. In the world of work, jobs where a worker is dependent on direction are commonly very low paying. If we want our students to be successful in the work world, we need them to get to a point where they “don’t need to be told what to do” (personal communication, February 23, 2016). A standards-based approach to learning also moves away from being teacher-centered, where the teacher is viewed as the authoritarian of the grading and learning for each student; rather it puts an emphasis on allowing the student to become an “active participant in the development of his or her own education” (Iamarino, 2014, p. 8). “The culture of school is based on compliance, so students have not gotten the picture yet of going above and beyond,”(J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016) and a standards-based approach allows for students to develop and push their thinking if they are ready to extend past what is just expected of them.

Standards-based learning also allows for accommodation of different learning styles. It asks students to set attainable goals and allows teachers to meet students where they are at in achieving their goals (Iamarino, 2014). This puts the focus on being able to report on a student’s academic skill, since the employability skills are left out of the report on a student’s grade, and a student has multiple opportunities to show their knowledge without having a penalty from previous attempts reflected in that report. (Townsley et al., 2019)

It also impacts the instructional practices of teachers. Townsley (2014) reported that the student bell-ringers were originally just something he used for classroom management, but as he placed more emphasis on the content of that material versus just something that a student had to complete for points, he was able to gain a better understanding of where his students were

struggling. Zimmerman (2020) noted that she had to spend more time up-front creating quizzes and tests, but as the semester progressed she found that she was able to be more efficient with her feedback with students as questions were more deliberate about the learning versus worrying about point totals. When Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) looked at schools that had multiple teachers implementing standards-based grading systems they noted that planning time was more purposeful, and they were able to better focus on what a student actually needs.

A traditionally-based structure is based on a scarcity model, where every room has one teacher who initiates all the learning and work to occur. When a standards-based approach is utilized, it engages the students to be active in their learning. This is very important at the high school level, as students need to be better prepared for life after school and not rely solely on their teacher to provide instructions, which is asked of elementary students (J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016). Selbach-Allen et. al (2020) reported that the educators they interviewed who had transitioned to a standards-based approach felt that they were able to push students for more rigor and higher standards in their assessments because with a standards-based approach students had multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in the standards assessed. Zimmerman's (2020) results even indicated that her math students who entered her class less prepared seemed to benefit the most from the standards-based approach, and, therefore, her school wanted to expand this approach as it felt it may be a way to help close the achievement gap for their disadvantaged students. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) also found this benefit of possibly closing the achievement gap for students of minority populations in the classroom but were cautious since there still seemed to be a gap in state testing.

Personalized Learning

Another term that has been discussed more recently in education is *personalized learning*. This is an educational approach that aims to customize the learning for each student based on their strengths, needs, skills, and interests. It asks that each student has a learning plan that is developed to indicate how that student learns best and what they already know. When a standards-based approach to grading is implemented it allows for a more personalized approach to occur naturally. Dr. J. Rickabaugh (personal communication, February 23, 2016) discussed that schools have been set up to be efficient, and have a “get-er-done” attitude, and therefore teachers are used to setting up lessons and units for pace rather than personalization. Our buildings are set up as more of a teaching culture, but we need to prepare students to enter the workplace and to be prepared to learn. Therefore educators need to reevaluate their beliefs, assumptions, and strategies to better prepare our students for success post-school, and when students start to take more responsibility in their learning and set goals for themselves this encourages them to take responsibility in their work.

When Vanhala (2020) developed a standards-based approach in her classroom she and her students came up with a “Student’s Bill of Rights” which included three principles:

- Grades should be an objective reflection of what a student actually knows and can demonstrate, [they are] not a reflection of behavioral, personal, or socioeconomic characteristics.
- Grade reporting should communicate useful information. Grades should be a record of an individual’s academic strengths and weaknesses, [and be] able to be used for improvement.

- Mistakes are an opportunity to learn, and everyone learns at different paces and in different ways. Students should therefore be allowed multiple opportunities to practice and demonstrate learning of clearly communicated learning objectives (p. 69).

Through the use of these principles, each student is afforded the opportunity to show their learning when they are able, which follows a personalized approach.

Marzano and Hefebower (2011) indicated that “the most powerful form of assessment that a teacher can make” (p. 35) are student-generated assessments. This type of assessment comes from a variety of assessment tools, such as a basic knowledge quiz, a more complex assessment, or even simply an informal conversation between teacher and student where they can truly see if that student has mastered the skill-based on that informal assessment. A teacher can decide based on formative data what the best way is to determine if each student has mastered the skill that they are working on.

In a personalized approach, teachers are afforded the benefit of being able to conduct student conferences with students to get a better understanding of what their students know. This tactic is familiar to some, as many English teachers have used writing conferences in their practice, but it is a newer approach in other disciplines. The NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) indicated that a standards-based approach is better equipped to handle the conferencing needed, as it allows teachers and students the opportunity to gather necessary knowledge gained and process the learning that has occurred (Imarino, 2014).

Standards-based grading “accommodates different learning styles, sets attainable goals, and provides teachers with the opportunity to meet students wherever they are in the process of achieving those goals” (Imarino, 2014, p. 9) A personalized approach is also beneficial to schools when utilizing standards-based grading practices as it helps schools to develop more

efficient and beneficial interventions for students in each standard, and will usually allow a student to show their competency for that one standard versus having to redo an entire failed course, which is more standard practice in traditionally-based reporting (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016).

When utilizing a standards-based approach personalized learning occurs naturally as it allows teachers to differentiate their instruction so that each student can reach the standard, whether they take an alternative route, or have modifications made so that each student can achieve a mastery level in that standard, and even allow some students to show their advanced skill within a standard (Brookhart, 2011). This is a new skill for some teachers, and just simply differentiating requires the teacher to create the learning, but when personalization is employed properly students will also take an active role in helping to determine the learning needed to succeed in each standard. Teachers should be asking themselves “what am I doing that my learners could and *should* do, and how will they benefit from it?” (J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016). Traditional models rely heavily on the teacher, and in most cases the teacher does everything, but when utilizing the approach of a standards-based model innovation can come from anyone, and does not solely rely on the teacher to provide the insight into learning. This is where personalization can flourish, as students can lead topics, discussions, and bring in their own expertise and interests into the classroom to meet the standards that are assessed.

One other adjustment that teachers will need to make for personalized instruction to take place is adjusting for time. In a traditional model, it is common for a concept to be taught one day, some form of assessment to happen the next day, and then the class moves on to the next thing to be taught. Most of the time the intervention needs to occur immediately after the

learning, this learning opportunity is missed and the class moves on, then it does not happen until much later or does not happen at all. Dr. J. Rickabaugh (personal communication, February 23, 2016) noted that the longer the missed intervention “rests” the more permanent it becomes that the “non-learning” that occurs remains. Ideally, students should only be taking a summative assessment when they are ready, and it is not a surprise to them, this then requires monitoring along the way so that both the student and the teacher know whether or not that student is ready for the test. Many educators that have moved to this approach have created assessment windows, so that time is still finite, as they are looking to accommodate the learning for a student, but not procrastination (J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016). Townsley and Varga (2018) described a theory which explains that it is possible for all students to learn at high levels, but “when instruction and time are held constant,” as they are in most traditionally based classrooms, then “not all students are likely to learn” (p. 95). A standards-based classroom allows and encourages students to re-assess individually until they have reached mastery, even if their peers have already demonstrated their understanding of the standard.

Many students are familiar with the idea of re-assessment because many of their activities they participate in and out of school ask them to achieve a certain level of mastery before they can continue. Dr. J. Rickabaugh (personal communication, February 23, 2016), explained that many of today’s students are familiar with video games and they typically spend many hours on them. Video games are mostly set up as a decision-making environment, so players have to make choices to help them advance. Also, most games are set up so that a player does not get to move on to the next level until they are ready and can prove that they have mastered the current level. Educators need to shift their thinking from a learner being simply a vessel to be filled with

knowledge, and think of each student more as a resource in helping to facilitate their own learning.

Students are prepared to take responsibility for their learning. Selbech-Allen et al. (2020) observed that their students are very goal-oriented and the standards-based grading model benefitted most students. One student noted that they felt as if they were “treated as mature [young] adults, and our learning becomes our responsibility,” and another noted that “one pro of the system is that it is very easy to control and know what your grade will be” (p.1118). Selbech-Allen et. al. (2020) also commented that as educators they felt they were better able to communicate about students' needs and help to improve on individual weakness, allowing for a personalized approach to feedback and learning to occur. Many of their students took the opportunity to work ahead because they had the instructor's feedback, and they also discovered that their students took advantage of more collaboration and reassessment opportunities when they transitioned to a standards-based approach. This allowed for their students to personalize their learning and take responsibility by either working ahead to continue their learning, or working hard at re-learning, working with others to fully master each and every standard that was assessed.

Accommodations and Modifications

Standards-based grading is a system that is meant to ensure the success of every learner. Struggling learners are largely a part of why standards-based grading exists, as a standards-based approach allows for natural accommodations and modifications that need to occur in the curriculum, not only for the populations that need it to, but for each and every student. Jung and Guskey (2011) noted that in a traditional model when students are given accommodations or modifications this generally decreases their motivation as their grade doesn't necessarily show

what they can do, it really just shows who they are. They also indicated that this problem also usually leads to grade inflation, but does not truly show what a student knows how to do. When educators clearly indicate the standards that have been mastered and which need more work they can adjust their instruction for each student. This helps all students, as those that are struggling have the ability to retest and reassess through formative assessment, and the more gifted students are able to challenge and push themselves in each standard (Shippy et. al. 2013).

Scriffiny (2008) acknowledged that teachers are often frustrated by the uncontrollable factors that many exceptional learners face on a day to day basis, and since educators are tasked with the challenge of ensuring they are able to provide exceptional learners opportunities to be successful in their learning, many find that standards-based grading can assist them. One of the biggest challenges in working with exceptional learners is the notion that they themselves don't see themselves as good learners, which puts the onus on the teacher to work with the student in finding their talent and capabilities as a learner, as it is common that the student will avoid further tasks in the fear of failing again and the belief that do not have the ability to succeed academically (Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016). Since students often lack the motivation and desire to grow and learn, they will disengage and try to just get by with a barely passing grade. As a secondary educator, it seems impossible to re-engage the unmotivated learner, but in a standards-based grading model, students can create a new perception of themselves, by viewing and examining their previous successes. They can build off that past success and learn from the feedback that is a crucial component of standards-based grading.

When utilizing a traditional model, teachers are required to provide all the opportunities for students to demonstrate success in their class, but when a standards-based approach is put in

place it allows the student to take ownership in their learning with the feedback provided to them. Jung and Guskey (2011) recognized that there are five steps that can assist in assigning grades to exceptional learners who require accommodations and modifications, those include:

- “Determining whether the expectation is attainable for the learner,
- Determining the type of adaptation needed,
- Determining the modified expectation,
- Basing the grade on the modified expectations, and
- Communicating the meaning of that grade” (p. 34-36).

The last of those steps is already something that is an expectation in a standards-based model, as it accurately portrays the student’s abilities to reach a certain standard. With the notation that modifications were made in receiving the grade, this is a fair representation to all the parties involved in the grading for these students. Jung and Guskey (2011) also pointed out that this may help students in being more involved in school. If modifications are made to allow a student to show what they do know, and their grade is reflective of that, it may allow them eligibility to be involved in extracurriculars, particularly sports, and generally, the more involved a student becomes in school activities the more involved they become in their academic abilities.

The differentiation that is required in teacher’s instructional practice for a standards-based grading model is needed as some of the common standards need to be modified for students to be able to achieve that standard, and strategies are also needed to push and assess students who are ready for more advanced work (Brookhart, 2011). When students are afforded multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning based on the feedback they receive, they are then held accountable for their learning while honoring that students gain knowledge and develop the skills to master the standards assessed at different rates (Townsley, 2019). Townsley

(2014) acknowledged that it is important to value what the students are learning, “regardless of when they learn it” because as we modify the standards for students, educators must come to realize that “learning does not always take place on a predetermined schedule” (p. 69).

Another modification that is typically applied when using standards-based grading is that a student's best performance is used to generate their grade for a given standard, rather than averaging scores. It is assumed that a student may not perform very well on a first assessment, but when they are given multiple attempts to show a higher level of learning, the standards-based grading model will only reflect the student's best attempt. In a traditional model, a student is “penalized” for their earlier learning by averaging their attempts together. Only the most recent evidence of mastery is emphasized in determining their grade for that standard (Townsley et. al., 2019). With a standards-based model in place, which allows for mistakes and failure, and opportunities to retake and review standards, students can build confidence. The exceptional learners should be able to find more success in a standards-based grading model, and hopefully, a more motivated learner will emerge.

Townsley (2019) indicated that teachers who made these modifications in their classrooms found that this also provided better information to families, as they could better ascertain where a student was at in their learning of the content.

Challenges of Standards-Based Grading

Many educators have a fear to transition to a standards-based grading model because they want to get it “‘right’ in the eyes of [both] parents and teachers,” (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020, p. 6) and with some reported inconsistencies in the implementation at various schools due to this model still being in what is considered an “infancy” stage, many school leaders are leery to make the transition. Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) commented that it takes bold and strategic

leadership to make this change, as it will remedy many of the issues surrounding the inaccuracies found in traditional grading practices and ensure that student's grades will be much more reliable once they have adopted a standards-based approach. The challenges of standards-based grading for various stakeholders are explored first for parents, followed by educators, and concluding with students.

Challenges for Parents

Changing to a standards-based grading model not only challenges educators' beliefs and fears when implementing these changes but also presents many challenges for parents and students in comprehending what their report cards mean. Townsley et al. (2019) reported that secondary principals found that parents were more confident with traditional grading practices as that is what they grew up with, and felt as if there was a "communication betrayal" when teachers made early adaptations to standards-based grading models. This "betrayal" has led to some teachers being hesitant to adopt any changes to their grading model, as they would be seen as upsetting the "status quo." Due to this hesitation by teachers, school leaders then were unsure if they should move forward with implementing standards-based grading in their building with the lack of teacher support.

This fear that some parents may have towards standards-based grading comes from wondering if their child will have a fair shot in the admissions process for post-secondary educational aspirations, and Townsley and Varga (2018) found that some parents were so concerned that their student's GPA and standardized test scores would be so negatively impacted, that they transferred their students to schools who still continued with a traditionally based grading model.

This fear that students are negatively impacted in that admissions process has been dispelled by admissions officials (Townesley et al., 2019). Many university officials have asked that high school principals communicate with the parents at their schools that both traditionally based grading and standards-based grading applicant transcripts are assessed equally to “ensure a fair and equitable admissions process”(Townesley, 2019, p. 37) for all applicants.

Parents are also concerned that students who have adapted to a standards-based grading model will then have to adapt back to traditional grading practices once at the college/university level, leaving them at a disadvantage (Townesley, 2019). In fact, colleges have noted that grade inflation has been an issue with students for quite some time, as students feel as if they are more of a consumer in their education rather than a learner, and expect high grades. Iamarino (2014) noted that a standards-based grading system “in which grades are in direct correlation to learning objectives, would make it more difficult for universities to acquiesce students undue expectation of high grades” (p. 5). The issue of grading is a pressing topic in higher education, with even some educators adapting to a standards-based grading model at their colleges and universities.

Another issue that parents have with a standards-based grading model, is that it makes report cards more complex and cumbersome, and are therefore much harder for parents to read and understand. Schools would need to educate parents about the reason that changes were made to the report card, and spend time explaining how they now work. Townesley et al. (2019) found that some parent groups have assembled against the change in grading practices, especially when they feel that everything else is going well in their schools, so change is not needed. Therefore, school leaders need to make clear the benefits that standards-based grading brings to their students, while recognizing the challenges and difficulties that come with change, but it is also suggested that if the perspective of college students and graduates also share their experience and

success with learning and standards-based grading that may dispel some of the fears that parents may have surrounding the change (Townesley, 2019).

Guskey et al. (2010) noted that when Kentucky attempted a state-wide standards-based report card there was a need for parent-friendly language for each standard. Some of the parents in this study faced a lot of confusion because numbers were no longer associated with the grade. The parents were used to averaging scores to show a grade, but since that is no longer used, they felt as if the grade needed more explanation to be clear as to how the student achieved such. In many instances, schools continue to utilize a traditional A-F grading system and align that with their standards-based model. Generally, descriptors are used to indicate what that grade means (A= Advanced Level of Understanding, B= Beyond Basic Level of Understanding, C= Basic Level of Understanding, D= Not Yet Achieved Standard). These descriptors replace those “numbers” or averages that parents are used to seeing. Therefore some feel that an “A” is now too difficult to obtain in this standards-based system, as many parents and students feel that a “C” is not an acceptable grade and is below average (Powers, 2013). This then puts the onus on the teacher to adjust the thinking of both parents and students, that a “C” is representative of mastering a standard at the basic level, and that if students are looking to receive a higher grade they can do so through extension activities typically.

With some of the pushback that has come with this type of grading, some schools have dropped the A-F grading scale, and only report the descriptors used on a student’s report card for each standard, which again leads to that fear that parents have, feeling as if their student will not have a fair shot in the admissions process at the schools they apply to (Townesley et al., 2019). There also appears to be an aversion to dropping the traditional grading model for parents, because many time-honored American traditions such as: honor roll, athletic eligibility

requirements, valedictorians, and other practices and customs that would need to be adapted to fit a standards-based model as well (Peters et. al. 2017).

Some parents also take issue with the processes and learning structures that come with transitioning to a standards-based grading model. When Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) surveyed a group of middle school parents that felt that while the multiple opportunities that students had to show mastery in a standard was a positive change, they still felt as if omitting the homework as a part of the student's grade was negative for their students. Townsley (2014) also noted the challenge that comes with communication with parents and students with timeliness and processes required for reassessment opportunities.

Challenges for Educators

With the philosophical resistance to standards-based grading being so “widely documented” for parents, and principals allocating a significant amount of time to educate parents on the changes that are required, not much has been reported on the time spent to prepare teachers and get them to “buy-in” to this type of grading policy reform and the success that can come from it (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Although Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) did note the differences in perceptions to a standards-based grading policy seemed to be somewhat generational, with younger teachers being more favorable to this change than their “more experienced counterparts” (p. 4). Therefore a lot of time and training is required to make a change to standards-based grading.

According to Brookhart (2011) districts that have made the decision to base student achievement on standards must focus their professional development on *learning*, and not get “swamped by side issues,” and this change also requires many hard decisions to be made. She fears that some educators get so engrossed in the details of the change and don't focus on why

the reform is necessary, and sometimes this results in a standards-based system that makes even less sense than most traditionally based models. She went on to explain that if educators do not ask the right questions in making the change to standards-based grading they are left with confusion among all the parties involved. The questions that educators need to be asking in their meetings about making such a change include:

- What meaning do we want our grades to convey?
- Who is the primary intended audience for this message?
- Grades are not about what students *earn*, but are actually about what students *learn*. To what degree do you and your colleagues believe that? If you do agree, what are the advantages to you and to your students? If you don't agree, why not? (pp. 12-14).

Brookhart (2011) found that many teachers struggled when answering these questions, as it dealt with some of their long-standing beliefs and habits, and went against the experiences they had as a student themselves and in their practices for their own classrooms. She goes on to explain that this skepticism towards standards-based grading is expected, and if teachers are not able to voice their concerns in a safe and honest conversation in their professional meetings, even more resistance towards this change in grading tends to occur. If the space is open for educators to voice their concerns, they seem to be more willing to try new things and inform themselves on the beliefs they had when addressing the questions mentioned above.

Once those important philosophical conversations and training about making the change to standards-based grading have had the time to take place, then comes the time to simply train teachers in how to grade using the standards. Townsley & Buckmiller (2020) did report that teachers valued when their principals provided differentiated professional learning for their

differing levels of expertise to standards-based grading. Guskey et al. (2010) found that some of the concerns teachers had was that it was difficult to understand why they would *only* include summative work in a student's report card, as they felt that formative work should play a role in the grade as well. They also noted that schools in Kentucky that adopted their state-wide report card that added categories for soft-skills (such as: timeliness, work habits, behavior, etc.) added much more time in the grade report, and while teachers thought the information was valuable it was much more cumbersome to complete. Spencer (2012) described that some teachers spent a considerable amount of time as they had a hard time discerning which standards are the most important standards for their course, and worried about finding the time for students to be able to reassess for any given standard. Zimmerman (2020) echoed this concern noting that transitioning to a standards-based system requires a "considerable amount"(p. 1051) of time and training, as educators not only need to develop strong assessments and rubrics but be prepared to explain the rationale behind this system.

Some teachers simply have difficulty justifying the time spent on standards-based report cards, especially when reporting the soft skills that a student has demonstrated, as they feel that it could be better spent on lesson planning (Guskey & Bailey, 2010). Some also fear that there might be less time available for instruction time as generally to produce the report cards needed in a standards-based grading model it would require more conferencing with students "as means of gathering, processing and discussing all manner of necessary information" to be sure that students are fully able to grasp the standard which they are working on (Iamarino, 2014) While this conferencing time is valuable for the student, some wondered about the whole of the group, and noted that they are not as familiar with instructing in this way, and not sure if the time

constraints in the classroom would allow for the proper conferencing needed to assess this information with each student.

Another worry that educators have is for their students who are considered more of an exceptional learner. These student's grades are based on modifications made to ensure they have an opportunity to succeed and show progress, but some wonder if that is fair when calculating GPA. They worry that unless it is denoted that the grade came with modifications made, it is not a fair representation for that student to show what they actually know and are able to do (Jung & Guskey, 2011). Jung and Guskey (2011) also noted that this fear is somewhat alleviated when grades are reported for students' learning skills, effort, work habits, and progress towards achieving their goals.

Additionally, Guskey and Bailey (2010) found that some district officials were hesitant to make any changes, as it is a costly expenditure to make. Since so many teachers have reported that they lack the professional learning that is required for grading and assessment, school leaders have to look to hire outside consultants to help lead their staff in such professional development (Townesley & Buckmiller, 2020). Townesley (2019) also found that school leaders who provided ongoing professional development found better success when adapting to using the principles of standards-based grading model, but this comes at a cost of time and money for these schools.

The training that is needed for teachers in how to grade in this manner is only one of the costs. Zimmerman (2020) also reported that the gradebook program utilized at her school was not compatible with the standards-based system that she was using, and therefore she had a cumbersome excel spreadsheet used to keep track of students' progress. This is not a "trivial task" (p. 1051) she noted, and therefore recommended that schools look into modifications for

their gradebook. It is almost a requirement when making the change to standards-based grading to modify the computer gradebooks, since the typical gradebook and report card systems that are used to generate grades still use points, and those would need to be overhauled. With these expenditures, some district leaders feel that they can not afford the monetary costs associated with this change, and other leaders may simply look at the non-monetary costs such as parent uncertainty and the typical implementation dip as reasons for not making the change to standards-based grading (Townasley & Buckmiller, 2020).

If school leaders determine that they do want to transition to a standards-based grading system, Zimmerman (2020) noted that educators need to be made aware that it is not simply an assessment system. Whole courses typically need to be redeveloped to show the transparency that is needed to make clear the learning objectives in each course. Each educator needs to be prepared to make the changes needed for the course as a group, which requires a considerable amount of collaboration time to develop the content and procure the resources needed to implement this system (Zimmerman, 2020). Selbech-Allen et al. (2020) also stated that there is a “significant up-front labor required to construct standards, build grading policies, and design assessments to measure those goals,” and to ensure that each teacher in the course is doing the same in their class. Townasley (2019) also reported in his study that teachers mentioned an increased workload when making this change, and that these educators also felt that since making the change to standards-based grading it seemed to threaten grade inflation much more than their previous experiences. However, Dr. J Rickabaugh (personal communication, February 23, 2016) commented on the need to look past summative assessments, which may lead to grade inflation, as those really only benefit the college and parent audiences. Whereas formative assessment where the learning truly takes place is highly beneficial to the students, but

challenges educators' relationships and communication with parents, since those scores are not typically reported in a standards-based grading model, making it difficult to understand where their student is at in the learning process. Some have even reported that educators may have a difficult time “selling” a standards-based approach since some studies have revealed that student ACT scores may have been negatively impacted by the standards-based grading practices (Townsley & Varga, 2018). Although the same study from Townsley and Varga (2018) showed that it didn't appear that student GPAs had any impact from the change in grading, they did wonder that since there was conflicting quantitative evidence to support standards-based grading, given a “solid theoretical base supporting standards-based grading,” (p. 106) is there enough of a “return on investment to overcome the necessary time and energy” (p. 107) required to convince those resisting changing the grading practice.

Challenges for Students

Another challenge for educators is ensuring that students see the value in their learning from a standards-based grading system, as they tend to be some of the biggest resistors to such a change. “Because students are much more familiar with points-based grading systems, they may express feelings of discomfort in their first exposure to alternative grading systems” (Townsley & Schmid, 2020, p. 3). Students are used to being awarded points for the completion of their assignments, and in a typical standards-based system, students now would not receive those points, rather they receive feedback on their work. This leads to students sometimes viewing homework as “pointless” since they are not given a grade per se for their work. Peters et al. (2017) quoted a student in their study who said that “students need to learn how learning works” (p. 22). This quote helps to explain the struggle that educators face in having their students adjust their views toward learning, specifically moving from a fixed mindset to one of growth. Without

this change in mindset, this leads to an “implementation dip” (Townsend et al., 2019, p. 285) where many educators notice students' lack of participation as they work in gaining the necessary skills for students to have to garner more success in a standards-based grading model. This requires proactive communication by teachers to show the purpose and connection of the learning from the assignments to the standards to increase student buy-in.

Students also exhibit some of the same fears that parents have. Peters et al. (2017) found that many students in his study felt they were going to be at a disadvantage when it came to both college admissions and scholarships, since their school was one of the only schools participating in a standards-based grading model, and their principal noted that most of his students were only concerned about their GPA, they did not care how to achieve it, but wanted to make sure they were not at a disadvantage to obtain the highest GPA possible. Many students in this study found it more difficult to maintain high grades and claimed that in this standards-based model it was “harder to get an A” and “a lot more people are failing” (p. 17). When Selbach-Allen et al. (2020) surveyed their students and asked for suggestions to improve their standards-based grading system, some felt that the achievement level expected was too high, and felt that standards should be lowered to make an A more achievable.

With these students' concerns, Peters et al. (2017) discussed the challenges of schools and teachers to “create environments for safe, honest conversations about students' beliefs and frustrations with regard to grading,” (p. 25). They fear that relationships between teachers and students suffer when these concerns are not addressed, and if possible schools should try to include students in their decisions about grading to have more impact and meaning for their students. Educators should also ensure that when implementing a standards-based model in their schools they work together to establish the same protocols and procedures, as some students

have commented that they are aware when their teachers are against standards-based grading, or simply do not understand what it takes to run a course with this type of grading system (Peters et al., 2017). Without having all teachers on the same page it is hard for students to know what is expected of them. Diefes-Dux (2019) commented that the biggest barrier in implementing standards-based grading is the lack of familiarity that a student has with this type of system, and since feedback is essential in a standards-based system some students fail to engage with the feedback given to them as they sometimes do not understand that feedback, do not act on their feedback, or simply do not review the feedback they have received.

Since engaging with feedback is an essential part of the teaching and learning strategy in a standards-based grading model this then challenges educators by providing training for their students in the ability to question their grades and work with the feedback given. In a standards-based model, students are to take responsibility in their learning, and generally, students are less likely to question a teacher who they would view to have the authority. Townsley and Varga (2018) also wondered if a teacher's authority influenced a student's willingness to work within a standards-based grading model, as students may "perceive learning as a means to appease the teacher" (p. 105) rather than a way to master the content in the course. A standards-based learning model pushes students in their responsibility and moves away from being totally teacher-centered. It requires the student to ask questions to improve their learning, "some of which may even challenge us [teachers], and our teaching habits, in unanticipated ways" (Iamarino, 2014, p. 7). This can be a struggle for teachers who are not used to having students question a teacher's strategies to help improve the student's learning.

Zimmerman (2020) found that establishing the culture and explaining the roles and responsibilities of the students was needed for students to be successful in her standards-based

course. This does require teachers to build time at the beginning of the course and to also review throughout the semester, which some are reluctant to do as they believe instructional time is lost, but in order for students to find success in a standards-based class, they must know how to find support within and outside of the class to ensure their success. Diefes-Dux (2019) also cautioned that teachers must provide feedback of “high quality” (p. 847) and that it comes in a timely fashion so students can get the most use out of it.

Another concern that critics of standards-based grading have is that some students may become lax when preparing for summatives since they know they will have another chance (Selbach-Allen et al., 2020). Other educators worry about the student who is diligent in their preparation and continues to put in a concerted effort but continues to struggle to meet a proficient level in the standard, and this may occur for a variety of reasons (language barriers, lack of prior knowledge, etc.), they wonder if procedures need to be reformed in a standards-based model so each student’s efforts can show academic success (Hochbein & Pollio, 2016).

Standards-Based Grading’s Impact on Students

With standards-based grading being still a relatively new approach to assessing students, many are skeptical and wonder whether this change will really make a difference for students. Vanhala (2020) found that with all the time and effort put forth she did see a benefit for her students, especially with their attitudes. She went on to explain that she saw many develop a growth mindset, and students demonstrated persistence and determination when attempting to master the standards, which made her feel that the work she did to “emphasize learning and make grading meaningful [was] worthwhile” (p. 70). The impact that standards-based grading has on student ability and capability to learn, as well as the motivation that students have towards learning, are discussed further in this section.

Student Ability and Capability to Learn

The impact that standards-based grading has on students not only affects a student's individual abilities but also has a greater influence on the schools as a whole. It was reported by Hochbein and Pollio (2016) that the culture and climate in their school transformed once standards-based grading was implemented, and the overall feel at the school went from feeling defeated to that of optimism, which benefited so many of their students. Deddeh et al. (2010) found in their study at their school in Michigan that there was quite a bit of excitement once it was implemented and they were convinced that it is improving student learning in their building. One student in their building said, "I have an 'A' in my science class this year, and it is not because of extra credit, participation, and homework. It is because of my understanding of science" (p. 54). Another student noted that standards-based grading "has helped my grade tremendously, because when you practice, if you don't understand what you are learning, it is not counted against you and it gives you more time to learn what needs to be learned" (p. 58).

Deddeh et al. (2010) specifically mentioned the need for students to have the ability to be given a second chance, rather than moving on from learning once a grade has been issued, and many teachers support the need to try again, but a traditional model does not support that strategy. Guskey (2006) noted that educators advocated that there was an "importance of engaging students in challenging learning tasks accompanied by specific and personalized guidance and direction for success" (p. 14). That guidance would be available in the feedback provided during the student's first attempt at learning, and they would be able to demonstrate growth in their learning with the second chance provided from a standards-based approach to learning. Townsley (2014) even reported that students began to seek out ways to improve their

learning, as they felt they had a better understanding of where they were at, in both ways to improve and ways to continue to learn.

Zimmerman (2020) reported that students were appreciative of the opportunity to control their learning when given feedback on how to improve. She further explained that when standards-based grading is implemented it fosters an appreciation for learning and encourages students to demonstrate the appropriate learning behaviors without that “extrinsic motivation factor” (Zimmerman, 2020, p. 1052) of getting the highest grade. Peters et al. (2017) noted that students typically have many misconceptions when it comes to learning and assessment, but when schools began to implement standards-based grading some students surveyed said that “students need to learn how learning works” (p. 22). Making it clear that students do know that how they learn is important to continued growth and success. Selbach-Allen et al. (2020) observed that their students were very goal-oriented, and many appreciated that their learning became their responsibility, with one student even commenting that “it is very easy to control and know what your grade will be” (p. 1118).

Some students, while generally positive about their standards-based grading experience, have wondered if the standards that are assessed are too hard, and feel that some if not all of the standards should be lowered to make an “A” more obtainable (Selbach-Allen et. al, 2020). Powers (2013) also explained that the understanding that parents have about what equals an “A” of a “C” will need to be readjusted, since traditionally an “A” is many parent’s objective for the student with a “C” being unacceptable, but in standards-based grading typically an A is reflective of advanced-level understanding or work in the standard. Diefes-Dux (2019) also explained that this barrier for students to embrace standards-based grading comes from their lack of familiarity, which means some fail to engage with the feedback that is provided and they do not create a plan

to improve their understanding of that standard. Townsley & Buckmiller (2020) have also worried that reports have not shown a positive correlation between standards-based grading and state testing results for all students, but they have remarked that it appears when looking at different groups of students, African-American students seemed to have benefitted the most from standards-based grading when looking at their state test results, particularly in regards to science tests.

Grades also have an enormous effect on a student's mental health and well-being. Townsley and Schmid (2020) noted in their research that student's found their stress levels greatly reduced when taking a standards-based course at the undergraduate level, and many left feedback to the faculty feeling that they "actually learned" (p. 3) rather than just tried to accumulate points towards a grade. Selbach-Allen et al. (2020) had students who echoed that feeling, as the typical student comment about standards-based grading was that it was "great and less stressful" (p. 1118). Vanhala (2020) also described the confidence student's felt from standards-based grading in understanding the course content taught at the end of their course. Peters et al. (2017) also commented that the collaborative environment that is established in a standards-based system can "improve student-teacher relationships, and foster growth in belonging, self-worth, and competence" (p. 12). Not only does standards-based grading encourage this positive mindset, but as Peters et al. (2017) also reported students began to engage more with content and take ownership of their learning.

Student Motivation

Standards-based grading is also making an impact on student motivation, which is another issue that educators are focused on improving. Townsley et al. (2019) discovered in their research that traditional grading practices, like averaging student attempts at learning, have been

very detrimental to student motivation. When a student feels like the system is set up for them to fail, they have a hard time finding the motivation to want to give it their all and do their best. Brookhart (2011) remarked that “grading policies should be set up to support student motivation to learn” (p. 14), as many traditional practices allow students to feel that there is little value in continuing to try since it appears that “failure is inevitable” (p. 14). Therefore educators are looking at ways, some of which include their grading policies, to help increase motivation among their students. Peters et al. (2017) commented that when schools create environments that incorporate student voice, such as a standards-based grading system, then students usually find themselves more motivated to learn.

Marzano and Heflebower (2011) found that “demonstrating knowledge gain can be intrinsically motivating to students” (p. 37). When implementing a standards-based model, typically a student will track their progress in measuring their knowledge with each standard. They can physically see by charting where they started and see progress and growth in their development and knowledge of the content. Shippy et al. (2013) noted that when students see progress over the year or semester this will motivate and encourage them, as they can visually see the concepts that they now know. Dr. J. Rickabaugh (personal communication, February 23, 2016) also explained that there is a lot of power to motivate students when they can experience success. Seeing that growth is very rewarding to a student and this also allows the student to be able to better articulate their progress to others as well, specifically their parents. The tracking of their knowledge in each standard addresses the issue the Jung and Guskey (2011) addressed, which showed that students have decreased motivation because of accommodation or modification to their assessments. When the student sees their progress, and when they have more opportunity by reassessing to show success in each standard this alleviates the issue of

motivation, as many will work towards reaching their goals, even if they have been modified for that student.

Many students find the feedback provided in a standards-based learning model allows them to get a deeper understanding of how to improve. Iamarino (2014) looked at reports that suggested that a traditional points-based grading model has a negative effect on a student's motivation to want to improve and understand the material because the points don't allow for as much feedback and students typically lose interest since a grade is typically entered already. She also noted that in a traditional point-based model when students are assessed that is usually assumed to be the "end of learning" (p. 4) and does encourage further improvement towards competency in that standard. Turnitin (2016) conducted a survey that found that 78% of students believe that teacher feedback is "very" or "extremely important" to their learning. Students are looking to get feedback on how to improve. The Turnitin survey even found that 67% of students prefer to get feedback that challenges them and makes them think harder. Shippy et al. (2013) noted that when instructors are clear with their students about which standards are mastered and which need more work, this helps students on both ends of the spectrum, as the gifted students are being challenged further and the struggling students are able to retest. Diefes-dux (2019) also suggested the use of weekly reflections, where students can consider what feedback was given to them throughout the week, and see how they are learning from that feedback. Zimmerman commented that her students seemed to appreciate the opportunities provided in standards-based grading, as her students felt that they can take more control and ownership of their learning, so long as the tools necessary and feedback were provided.

There are some educators that worry about transitioning to a standards-based grading system, as their philosophical beliefs and personal experience, where many have found past

success in using grades to motivate students, would no longer be part of their daily practice (Townasley & Buckmiller, 2020). Others worry that students may become more lax or lazy in their preparations for their assessments since they know they will have another chance at being assessed, but Selbech-Allen et al. (2020) found that many students commented that their ability to redo problems did not make them lazy, but it enabled them to learn from their mistakes. Townasley (2014) found that students whose teachers had not moved to standards-based grading were wondering why they were not given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of the standards.

There was some decreased motivation that Peters et al. (2017) found in their study, with some students commenting that they would just reassess later, and some having “a feigned interest in learning” (p. 19), but they also noted that many students found that expectations were much more clear and a great strength of a standards-based grading model. Zimmerman (2020) also found that when transitioning to a standards-based grading system, extrinsic motivation (i.e. their grade), which she believes “fosters unproductive learning behaviors” (p. 1052), is removed, since students are now more focused on the learning and skills necessary to be successful in a standard, rather than focused on arbitrary points for a grade. Kohn (2011) also discussed the importance of teachers being able to foster more intrinsic motivation in students, which is the desire to learn, rather than only using the extrinsic motivation of grades. He even goes on to explain that when students are given grades it hinders their intrinsic motivation and their desire to learn, and says that a teacher’s primary goal should be ensuring that students have that desire.

When students feel that they have a responsibility in their learning, which is asked of students with standards-based grading, this gives students the motivation and desire to show their learning, including the strengths they display as well as the growth and progress they have made

along the way. The attitude of students shifts in a standard-based model allowing them to feel that they can try again, even when not finding success the first time. Traditionally students have felt that when they have to work harder that means they are not as smart, but when standards-based learning is applied students can recognize that not all learning fits everyone equally and some have to do things differently to achieve similar results (J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016).

Selbech-Allen et al. (2020) found that students' behavior shifted student behavior in a more positive way, as students had more incentive to keep working and trying to master concepts, and they were motivated to do so. Their students felt that they wanted to take responsibility for their learning, and began to understand that their learning was valued more than their performance/grades, and if they kept working on that learning then their performance/grades improved, and they did not need to be immediately proficient to prove they understood something. Zimmerman's (2020) students also had similar feedback from being assessed in a standards-based format. They came to understand that teachers are not simply assigning a grade, they are assessing their level of understanding in the concept or standard, and when feedback is provided, the students know what they need to do to get better. They also felt that they were actually learning, and there was a lot of accountability for them built into the standards-based model, forcing them to no longer take the "easy way out" (p. 1049), and many students enjoyed using a standards-based grading model as one stated that "once I got it I didn't have to keep unnecessarily doing work for a grade" (p. 1049).

The responsibility and attitude shifts that students experience not only increase their desire and motivation to do well in their courses but also benefit students in their future endeavors. Students who have to learn to advocate for themselves in a standards-based model,

are better able to articulate to their college instructors when they need help and how they may need help, which is driving many colleges to ask “how do learners learn, and how are they motivated” (J. Rickabaugh, personal communication, February 23, 2016). Students motivation to do better in school comes from the empowerment they have felt in a standards-based model, which research has also shown to improve student’s feelings of self-worth and competence because of the collaborative efforts that they are able to participate in for their learning, and has improved student and teacher relationships as well (Peters et al., 2017). Peters et al. (2017) discussed in their study that a growth mindset is developed in students when utilizing a standards-based model which alleviates the misconceptions that students tend to have about learning and assessment. Hudgens (2016) acknowledged that self-motivation needs to be a priority, as she has seen many teachers care more about a student’s academic success than the student themselves. When utilizing a standards-based model teachers are able to build in steps where students can celebrate the small accomplishments they make along the way, which Hudgens (2016) suggested to be an excellent motivator because “success breeds success” (para. 19), and students can begin to feel motivated to improve when they see those small successes.

CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

There has been a growing concern that American students are unprepared for life post-high school, which encouraged many states in the U.S. to adopt the Common Core State Standards, which focuses on specific standards and learning targets to improve quality instruction in every classroom (Spencer, 2012). This required teachers to evaluate their past grading practices as they did not always show what students' knowledge was or what they were capable of. Therefore, many schools began implementing a standards-based grading model, with the hope that using this model would also help reform the inequities that are found in a traditional grading model.

Grading has been a topic of interest for many years, but with the shift in what is being assessed due to adopting new state standards, educators are finding this to be the appropriate time to find an accurate assessment system that better captures what a student has actually learned (Townesley & Buckmiller, 2020). Traditional practices have left educators unable to explain the deficiencies that students displayed when grades did not accurately show what a student knows and affected the way in which students learn (Brookhart, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Townesley, 2014, Townesley & Buckmiller, 2020Vanhala, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). This has led educators to use a standards-based approach, which allows for students to have multiple opportunities to display their learning, provides teachers the ability to give more accurate feedback to students in their learning journey, and focuses on the process and progress that students are making rather than solely on the final product (Deddeh et al., 2010; Guskey et al., 2014; Iamarino, 2014). With this shift, teachers are being required to get the training needed to make the necessary changes to their grading practices (Townesley et al. 2019).

As educators begin to explore what a standards-based model entails, the benefits of pacing, rigor, and student achievement are presented. Standards-based grading creates the opportunity for educators to meet their students where they are at, allowing educators to help struggling students and push those that are ready for more of a challenge. Students are able to have more understanding of where they are at with the feedback they receive and the ability to reassess in any given standard (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; O'Connor, 2009). The feedback also allows teachers to create strategies for learning with reteaching and enrichment opportunities for students, and the feedback provided allows the student to become actively involved in their learning as well (Iamarino, 2014; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011, Rickabaugh, 2016). This does require teachers to adapt their instructional practices, but makes planning more purposeful, which benefits students with differing learning styles, as they can set goals to show achievement as they make progress, without the penalty of previous learning attempts (Iamarino, 2014; Townsley, 2014; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Townsley et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2020). The active engagement from students also pushes many to achieve higher results with the multiple opportunities to show their learning (Selbach-Allen et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2020).

Another benefit of a standards-based model is the personalized learning that naturally occurs. Personalized learning is an educational approach that aims to customize the learning for each student based on their strengths, needs, skills, and interests. The requirements of a standards-based grading model utilize the principles of a personalized approach, which include using student-generated assessments and student conferencing, which benefit teachers as they are better able to provide intervention and other resources for students to demonstrate success recognizing student's differing learning styles (Iamarino, 2014, Hochbein & Polio, 2016; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Teachers are also able to provide students with an opportunity to

show more advanced skills if they are ready (Brookhart, 2011). This does require teachers to adjust their timing in their classrooms, especially due to the need for students to be able to reassess, but it does encourage students to take responsibility for their learning as well (Selbech-Allen et al., 2020; Townsley & Varga, 2018).

The other benefit that comes from standards-based grading, is that it allows for more accommodation and modifications to occur, which greatly provides opportunities for the exceptional learner. In traditional models, exceptional learners have typically displayed less motivation for learning due to their modifications and have felt that they are not a good learner due to their unique circumstances, but since standards-based grading allows for *each* student to make modifications to demonstrate success in a standard, the exceptional learners no longer feel that they are receiving special accommodations, as each student is required to take ownership in their learning in a standards-based model (Jung & Guskey, 2011, Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Rickabaugh, 2016; Shippy et al., 2013). Differentiation is required of teachers when using a standards-based model, which allows for the modifications for exceptional learners, and provides opportunities for students who are ready for more advanced work, as each student learns at different rates and teachers need to be able to meet them where they are at (Brookhart, 2011; Townsley, 2014; Townsley, 2019). The other necessary modification that teachers need to make for all learners is the ability to reassess, which typically allows students to build more confidence in their learning abilities (Townsley et. al., 2019).

The literature review revealed several challenges that come from adopting a standards-based model. One of the biggest challenges is getting parents to understand this change. Parents fear that their students have an unfair disadvantage when it comes to the college admissions process, which university officials have declared as not true (Townsley, 2019;

Townsley & Varga, 2018; Townsley et al., 2019). Parents have also voiced frustration with understanding report cards, as many schools make changes to the traditional A-F grading scale and feel that an “A” is too hard to achieve, while some schools completely drop the traditional A-F grading scale, and some do not understand why schools would report “soft skills,” such as timeliness or behavior in separate categories (Guskey et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2017; Powers, 2013; Townsley, 2019; Townsley et al., 2019).

The challenge of preparing parents to understand the shift in grading also is met with the challenge of ensuring that educators can make the shift to standards-based grading in their classrooms (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Districts making this shift need to work with their educators in their professional development sessions to understand the grading model change is to benefit student’s ability to learn, and typically younger educators are more willing to make this change (Brookhart, 2011; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Teachers need training in how to assess for each standard and why they need to change some of their most common grading practices of the past (Guskey et al., 2010; Spencer, 2012; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). This also requires teachers to spend a considerable amount of time to develop new assessments and rubrics, and many teachers also lament on the time they feel is lost for instruction (Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Iamarino, 2014; Selbeck-Allen et al., 2020; Townsley, 2019; Zimmerman, 2020). Educational leaders are hesitant to make the change to standards-based grading as it is an enormous time and cost expenditure, and also requires that most schools adopt a new grading management system as many do not support a standards-based grading system (Townsley, 2019; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020).

The last challenge that educators face in adopting a standards-based grading system, is guiding students into an understanding of why this model would benefit them. Students are used

to receiving points, rather than feedback in their learning, and many students do not feel that the formative work and feedback provided is necessary for their learning (Peters et al., 2017; Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Townsley et al., 2019). Students also demonstrate similar fears that their parents have. They feel that they are at a disadvantage in the admissions process for colleges and that the standards are too difficult to easily obtain an “A” so they should be lowered (Peters et al., 2017; Selbech-Allen et al., 2020). Teachers must also establish a culture in their classroom that encourages students to become active participants in their learning using a standards-based grading system to find success (Zimmerman, 2020). Students need to feel they can question their teachers to improve their understanding, and they need to learn to use feedback and take action on it (Diefes-Dux, 2019; Iamarino, 2014; Townsley & Varga, 2018).

Challenges aside, many still wonder what impact standards-based grading has on student learning. Many educators and researchers discuss the positive impact that standards-based grading has on students when implemented in their classrooms, including improving student attitudes towards school and improving the culture and climate at schools (Hochbein & Polio, 2016; Vanhala, 2020). Others reported that student engagement increased, and many students were taking an active role in their learning (Deddeh et al., 2010; Guskey, 2006; Townsley, 2014). Students also seemed very appreciative to be able to take control of their learning, and use the feedback provided to really understand the concepts needed to be successful (Peters et al., 2017; Selbech-Allen et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). Standards-based grading also had a positive effect on students’ mental health, with some researchers reporting reduced stress levels for students and the ability to build confidence in themselves as a learner (Peters et al., 2017; Selbech-Allen et al., 2020; Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Vanhala, 2020).

The positive impact on student learning that standards-based grading has is also making an impact on student motivation as well. Traditional grading practices have been very detrimental to student motivation in the classroom, and when using a standards-based approach the policies that are implemented have been found to be a great motivation tool for educators (Brookhart, 2011; Townsley et al. 2019). The standards-based policies that help motivate students to learn include the ability for students to measure and monitor their progress and growth and see successes along the way, as well as providing an opportunity for student's to voice their concerns, and to reassess when necessary to show mastery in a standard (Jung & Guskey, 2011; Peters et al., 2017; Marzano & Hefebower, 2011; Shippy et al., 2013; Rickabaugh, 2016). The feedback that is provided in a standards-based model is also very helpful in motivating students at both ends of the spectrum as it provides students with the knowledge of how to improve in the standards, and researchers found that feedback is something that students are looking for as it is typically not found in a traditionally graded model (Diefes-Dux, 2019; Iamarino, 2014; Shippy et al., 2013; Turnitin, 2016; Zimmerman, 2020). The responsibility that students' felt for their learning in the various studies proves that many students are using the standards-based grading model as a catalyst in improving their motivation to learn, fostering a growth mindset, and allows students to appreciate that each individual has different strengths and weaknesses that they must work with to demonstrate success in the standards and helps to set them up for more success in their future endeavors (Hudgens, 2016; Peters et al. 2017; Rickabaugh, 2016; Selbech-Allen et al., 2020, Zimmerman, 2020).

Implications for Professional Application

The need to better prepare students for colleges and careers after high school was a primary goal when the Common Core State Standards were implemented in 2009, but with this

change the ways to grade and assess students using these standards also needed to change. That is why many schools began to implement a standards-based grading system. The skills that students develop in a standards-based grading system such as, to reassess, learn to use feedback, and develop a growth mindset, are some of the skills that students need to gain in order to find success as they enter post-secondary education or enter into the workforce. The other benefit that many of the studies addressed included reducing stress levels for students and allowing them to gain more confidence in their learning journey (Peters et al., 2017; Selbech-Allen et al., 2020; Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Vanhala, 2020). The benefits that educators and students have received from standards-based grading inspire others to pursue this change as well.

As districts then begin to implement a standards-based grading system in their schools, school leaders need to be prepared to not only train educators in how to grade using standards, but also need to have conversations to discuss the philosophical nature of what a grade actually means and why it is necessary. When educators begin this work in standards-based grading, they need to understand the benefits that students have from changing their past practices that some have used for many years, such as extra credit and participation points. Teachers need to look at their current practices and see what can be adapted or modified to work within a standards-based grading system, and also what new policies and procedures need to be put in place to ensure students will find success in the new grading system. Additionally, it is important that all school personnel work together to develop the same protocols and instructional practices within their classrooms (Selbech-Allen et al., 2020; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). When all the educators in a building are in agreement with one another, students and parents can feel assured that they will be able to demonstrate their success within this system.

Once educators are willing to be flexible and work within a standards-based grading system, this then requires students to develop the skills needed to be successful in such a system. Students will gain insight into their learning from the feedback that is provided and will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning in each standard. This will make communication with families more clear, as parents will be made aware of where their student is struggling and where they may display more strengths. It will require flexibility in the classroom, as not every student learns at the same pace or rate, which many students appreciate, but is a struggle for parents to understand and is one of the biggest changes that teachers need to make within their curriculum.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The research found for this thesis included recent studies (2010-2020) of schools and educators who have incorporated standards-based grading into their classrooms. The first guiding question looked at how instructional practices are reformed when using a standards-based grading system. Many of the studies found, focused on one school year or even just one semester of using standards-based grading systems. Due to this limitation, a suggestion is for researchers to use longitudinal research to look at how students and schools are impacted over a greater length of time. Townsley (2019) even recommended that schools reach out to college students who graduated from high schools that utilized standards-based grading as a way to determine more long-term benefits and deficiencies from this grading system.

The second guiding question looked specifically at the influence that standards-based grading has on students. This focus limited the research surrounding standards-based grading and the impact it has on educators. While many of the articles and studies included some anecdotal evidence of the impact that teachers felt, more empirical research could be done in future studies

to see educators' perspectives over time in using standards-based grading in their classrooms. The research could include seeing what impact standards-based grading has had on their instructional practices, and it could garner feedback from what patterns or evidence of student learning they have noticed since implementing the grading system in their classroom.

While reading the literature surrounding the impact that standards-based grading has on external assessments (ACT and state standardized tests) for students the results seemed mixed. Many reported lower ACT scores for students who used standards-based grading (Townnsley & Varga, 2018) but other studies showed more achievement with state standardized tests, specifically in content-related tests such as science (Townnsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Townnsley et al., 2019). Further research should look at the impact that standard-based grading has on external assessments, specifically since some schools seem to have better results than others, and since many schools rely on the results of those assessments to show their competence in helping their students become equipped for success for life post-high school whether at a post-secondary school or with their careers.

The last limitation is that existing literature on standards-based grading during a pandemic could not be found. As of writing, the global pandemic for COVID-19 is still in occurrence throughout the United States. Due to this limitation, many schools have had to greatly alter their learning platforms, as many began to teach remotely, which may have impacted student learning and the policies and procedures that educators were using in their physical classrooms. Because of this limitation, future research should focus on how educators are able to assess students in a virtual format, and if standards had to be altered or changed in order for students to be able to achieve them during remote learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to look at the impact that standards-based grading has on the secondary classroom. The guiding questions were:

GQ1: How does standards-based grading bring about reform to instructional practices in secondary classrooms?

GQ2: How does standards-based grading influence student learning?

A review of the literature found that many of the benefits that are obtained from standards-based grading include more rigor within classrooms, the ability for students to reach high achievement within the standards, and more modifications and accommodations for each student to have a more personalized approach at their learning journey. The research also examined the challenges that impact various stakeholders when making the change to standards-based grading. Those challenges comprised of ensuring parents and students are made aware of why a change is made, preparing teachers with the training and development to grade in such a manner, as well as to have teachers reform some of their past instructional practices to have students become more involved in their learning through the use of feedback and the ability to reassess until able to demonstrate mastery within a standard. Research also looked at the impact that standards-based grading has on students' learning and their motivation in school. Many students found a positive impression on their ability to actually learn when using a standards-based system. The influence that standards-based grading has on the educational practices of educators and the students who participate in it has a lasting impact that helps teachers in preparing learners to be more successful in their future endeavors.

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