

Grading for Equity: Competency-Based Grading and Social-Emotional Well-Being

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore shifts toward more equitable, accurate grading and assessment in K-12 education. Specifically, this study aimed to uncover the implications of the shift toward competency-based grading practice and policy on student metacognition.

Centered in the discovery was educational equity and how a shift in grading practice impacted student wellness, created bias-resistant grading policy and developed spaces for student centered learning practices aligned to grading and assessment. Additionally, this study uncovered both benefits and challenges when implementing competency-based grading practice and policy on the educational environment and on individual educators. Finally, the study uplifted best practice for the implementation of equitable, accurate grading policies and practices at the school, district or individual classroom level.

When students were provided the opportunity to engage in educational environments that had implemented a skills-based approach to grading and assessment there were clear implications for both student metacognition and educational equity. In implementing competency-based grading youth experienced assessment purely aligned to academic performance and progression within specific skills and standards, this feedback-based approach created the environment for student ownership, articulation and navigation of their own learning. By assessing skill and providing aligned feedback students were able to speak to a learning progression and shifted their language and thinking away from defining their progress as a letter grade given to them by an educator and were able to articulate a trajectory of growth based in assessment and data. Traditional grading has historically and continually marginalized students, specifically students experiencing systemic inequity based in social identity, and the shift toward

skill and competency-based grading practice and policy removed the inclusion of subjective factors such as behavior, attendance, compliance and/or participation from a student's grade. Educators and schools who have implemented bias-resistant grading policy demonstrate a recognition of traditionally harmful and misaligned measures of success that have historically diminished the grades of students with non-dominant social identities. Exclusively speaking to academic progress allows learning to be centered and bias-based factors to be reduced. The implementation of such policy and practice, of course, challenges educator mindset and necessitates a systemic and structural shift that takes capacity, time and perseverance; each element already taxed in educational environments creates additional challenges to implementation. However, successful implementation has been shown to create deeper connections to learning, more student-centered pedagogical approaches and high levels of intrinsic motivation to learn from students. As a result of the study, clear best practices for the implementation of accurate, equitable grading practices and policy arose. These included shifting from assignment-based grading to outcome or skills-based grading and aligned assessment. Additionally, the need for multiple measures and opportunities for assessment of skills and aligned feedback supported student metacognition within these shifting systems. In each situation, there necessitated both a power and a mindset shift in the roles of educator and students which moved their environments to more collaborative spaces of collective and facilitated learning. When successful, schools and districts who implemented competency-based grading policy and practice centered transparency and shifted the narrative away from grading as competition and toward progression of learning as an individual trajectory within the educational environment.

### Conceptual Rationale

Assessment and grading practices have long defined the educational experience of students and the pedagogical and instructional practice of educators. “Letter-based grading became universal in U.S. public schools by the 1940s. Today, protocols for handing out grades of A-F on a 100 point scale vary from district to district and classroom to classroom” (Alex, 2022, p.38). Educators have entered into classrooms, school buildings and districts with little to no training on how to effectively grade students which has resulted in vastly different approaches to grading and assessment, a pattern of antiquated practices repeating overtime and no sustained understanding what has constituted a “good” grade. Since the return to the classroom from the COVID-19 pandemic districts and educators have grappled with how to equitably support all students in gaining proficiency in the necessary skills and standards while also supporting those students in building confidence, ensuring social-emotional well-being. Research has shown that, “grades play a primary role in how adolescents shape their identities and learners and their life trajectories” (Feldman, 2019, p. 38). Throughout a student’s educational experience they, and their families, are consistently told how they are doing based on a set of measures defined by the school or the classroom teacher. When grades were dissected, however, we find that many measures were not indicative of student learning or behavior but instead measure compliance, behavior and inequitably favor students based on racially and socio-economically dominant social identities. In fact, “most districts prioritize equity, and many teachers entered the profession to disrupt and reduce achievement disparities, traditional grading practices often perpetuate rather than eliminate disparities, rewarding students who have privileges and resources and punishing those without” (Feldman, 2019, p. 39). Districts and school

communities across the country have turned to competency-based education and, in particular, standards-based or competency-based grading policies as a potential solution.

When reflecting on the implications for equity, student metacognition, and school or classroom structure many educators have documented a disconnect between student learning and traditional grading. “When grades are deliberately connected to learning, they provide little valuable feedback regarding students’ academic strengths and weaknesses, and can even be counterproductive” (Winger, 2005, p.3). Traditional grading has historically relied on compliance measures, such as homework, which may not demonstrate authentic understanding of skills and which students from economically and physically stable households have a proven completion advantaged. School buildings and districts have taken measures to move toward the assessment of conceptual understanding rather than completion or compliance and, in turn, students who have engaged in this learning approach have demonstrated a greater understanding of their own proficiency in core skills and competencies. In fact,

the academic preparation and learning history students bring with them to a teaching-learning situation can have a powerful effect on the level of achievement they attain. This history determines the cognitive skills and abilities students bring to the classroom. It also influences how they feel about learning and themselves as learners (Guskey & Pigott, 1988, p.207).

As schools and districts have started to recognize the need to understand conceptual understanding of core academic skills possessed by student the need for an examination of traditional systems of grading and assessment is elevated.

Recognizing the potential inequities and patterns of compliance-based assessment as an educational leader was an essential understanding both as the consideration of instructional best practice for student learning and supporting the equitable development of youth throughout their educational experience directly aligns to a multitude of PSEL standards. In particular the third standard of equity and cultural responsiveness which names that effective leaders, “ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015, p.11). The recognition of inequitable systems of grading and assessment that disproportionately benefit students in dominant social identity groups and have historically assigned compliance-based measures as indicators of student learning was, according to this standard, a core responsibility of the effective leader as reformed measures of grading and assessment have shown to enhance student metacognition, student perception of themselves as learners and achievers and have redirected assessment toward conceptual understanding. Additionally, standard 4 relating to curriculum, instruction, and assessment specifically calls for the employment of, “valid assessments that are consistent with knowledge of child learning and development and technical standards of measurement” (NPBEA, 2015, p.12). Ensuring student learning and proficiency in grade-aligned standards and skills is the responsibility of the effective educational leader as they have worked to create communities of learners, both adult and youth, who have an understanding of where they are in their own developmental trajectories. This understanding has led to environments in which student understanding of progress is emphasized over traditional compliance-based measures once the school has moved toward a competency-based system of grading and assessment. Furthermore, the

understanding of traditional versus reformed measures of learning as an educational leader exemplifies PSEL standard 10 based in school improvement, specifically in the element naming that, “effective leaders seek to make school more effective for each student, teachers, and staff, families, and the community” (NPBEA, 2015, p.18). Through this standard effective educators have strived to implement research-based best-practices that elevate student proficiency in necessary skills and standards. This transparency, in turn, has supported the developmental trajectory of educators and the collective understanding of student progress across school communities.

Based on the elements above, the purpose of this study was to examine the implications of competency-based grading policies and practices of student metacognition, educational equity and school or district-wide systems and structures. In the exploration of the above implications it was essential to also discover the limitations and aligned biases of traditional systems of grading and assessment while capturing best practices for implementation of reformed systems and policies aligned to student understanding and grading.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

### *Research Question One*

What were the implications on student metacognition of grading policies and practices?

### *Research Question Two*

What were the equity implications of grading policies and practices?

### *Research Question Three*

What were the pros and cons of shifting away from traditional grading policy and practices?

### *Research Question Four*

What were best practices for implementation of a competency-based grading system?



## REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

Connecting student metacognition with grading policies and practices.

A recurring theme when discussing the current state of education in the United States has been rigor with educators around the country grappling with what it means to create classrooms and schools that cognitively challenge students while creating the conditions for intrinsic motivation when it comes to learning and engagement. An awakening of sorts was started when as educators began to realize that academically rigorous classrooms disconnected from grading policies and practices were not sufficient. Historically, grades were meant to categorize and tier students to prepare them for working in labor or managerial positions based on their educational experience. Today, there has been a continued perpetuation of a historically flawed system in which compliance is rewarded above academic competency or progression in learning. A student's grade, typically, does not provide the context on the learning experience necessary to enhance their metacognition and support their understanding of how they mastered a standard or concept and where to go to continue to progress their learning. This approach to grading and assessment has failed to isolate behavior and compliance from academic mastery and progression. In a traditional system we have seen that, "when grades are not deliberately connected to learning, they provide little valuable feedback regarding students' academic strengths and weaknesses, and can even be counterproductive" (Winger, 2005, p 3.). That counterproductivity comes in the way students have been conditioned to approach learning and schooling in traditional buildings and districts. Students have been trained into a system that values their compliance over their learning; one that values good behavior over academic

mastery. This has resulted in generations of students who have failed to build conceptual understanding of key concepts but who have passed each grade level with much praise and high grades. “These practices result in inaccurate measures and encourage students to see school as being about compliance and points accumulation rather than learning” (Reeves et al, 2017, p. 42).

Without having connected academic skill and student achievement into the grading system the message sent to students has been that it is their responsibility to comply and behave without necessarily thinking deeply about how they achieved their grade or the ways in which their current understanding will lead them to deeper learning and progression moving forward. In fact, traditional grading,

practices provide little useful information about a specific student. A student might have received an overall or ‘omnibus’ letter grade of *B*, not because he had a solid grasp of the target concept, but because he was exceptionally well behaved in class, participated in all discussions, and turned in assignments on time. Likewise, a student may have received a percentage score of 62.9, not because she displayed significant gaps in understanding regarding the target content, but because she received a zero for tardiness on assignments or for disruptive behavior (Marzano, 2011, p. 36).

When districts, schools and classrooms have transitioned away from the traditional grading policies and practices which marry behavior, compliance and academic achievement in a 100-point scale averaged to one letter or point value they have been able to isolate academic progression within standards and concepts and have provided students with deep opportunity for reflection on their academic process and their conceptual understanding. Building student metacognition and supporting student and educator mindset in breaking from traditional systems

and policies when it came to assessment, feedback and grading is challenging work. The majority of classroom teachers and school leaders have shared a desire for curious, intrinsically motivated and engaged students. However, in traditional systems they find that students, “wanted a good grade. And the irony is, they were only responding as other educators and I had conditioned them to respond. We had trained them to see grades as a commodity rather than as a reflection of learning” (Winger, 2005, p. 5). To build student metacognition and align student learning with policy it was essential to break the version of schooling in which a grade was received instead of earned.

If educators wish to convince students that we value their understanding, their reasoning, their ideas, and their creativity, we must practice what we preach. By creating meaningful grade components rooted in essential learning, separating out nonacademic factors to ensure that we assess true learning, and sharing our passion for what we teach, we can use grades as a communication tool rather than as the goal (Winger, 2005, p. 3).

Students have needed to see purpose and relevancy in their learning and it has become paramount to instruction and pedagogy within classrooms all over the country to tie learning to the classroom community; however relevancy without connection continues to fail students. Without standards or competency-based grading policies students have not been able to see themselves as learners. By shifting to grading practices that isolate academics from student behavior many educators and schools have created the conditions for deeper student metacognition in which youth can see and articulate progression of learning within specific academic skills. When taking an approach to grading policy and aligned practice that has separated behavior from compliance, “parents and students can see how much the student has learned about each measurement topic and ascertain the student’s strengths and pressing needs”

(Marzano, 2011, p. 31). When allowed to think about grading practice as a progression of academic skill aligned to applied concepts educators have been able to clearly identify where a student started, currently is and where they need to go. With this trajectory comes a shift in conversation and feedback for students. In shifting away from naming the compliance elements that a student did or did not do and toward one that centers academic skill educators have had the opportunity to build student metacognition via feedback, grading practice and assessment tools. With the shift in grading policy came a shift in pedagogy that, in-turn, created the conditions for students to explain, explore and understand their progression toward mastery of academic standards and skills.

Using the term progression implied that students were on a trajectory toward deeper learning. However, if grading policy relied on an averaging of data from multiple sources including both academic achievement, compliance-based tasks and student behavior then the conditions created were one that centered compliance and lost the deep connection to learning that came from discussing academic skill. It has been seen that,

One rationale for the use of the average in calculating a final score appears to be that good students get things right the first time. But this is not true, except in cases where students aren't challenged. When the curriculum is rigorous, all students make mistakes, but the most successful students always learn from those mistakes. To average indicators of the students' performance across time is to neglect this facet of the learning process (Marzano, 2011, p. 28).

Here, Marzano highlighted the practice of naming failure as necessary but failing to link that process into grading policy when averages of multiple measures of the educational experience are tied into one final grade and presented to students and families. Without a shift toward

isolating academics in grading the conditions for deeper student understanding and metacognition of their progression as students could not be created. When students were provided the opportunity to reflect on their mastery of academic skills and concepts regardless of their behavior or compliance in the classroom they were able to see and talk about themselves as learners rather than describing themselves as the traditional grade they would receive. A student traditionally describing themselves as a “B Student” instead could describe where they were in the learning process and discuss how to move the needle toward mastery of concepts. When schools and educators have empowered students to see themselves as learners they not only deepen student thinking and understanding but shift the conversation to create more equitable environments for all students.

### Equitable grading and assessment

In order to understand how shifting away from traditional grading and assessment practices results in greater educational equity we need to first recognize that student identity and sense of self, as a result of traditional grading, was tied systemically to the marks they received in school. Traditional grading practices, “threaten the emotional well-being and academic outcomes of children. Even the discourse sometimes used to justify noxious grading policies – “getting them ready for the real world” – is eerily akin to the rhetoric of corporal punishment (Reeves et al., 2017, p. 40). Systems of traditional grading combine academic and nonacademic factors into one package, one letter, one number and this grade, despite mathematical inaccuracy and bias-based design, had then defined a child for the school year, the educational career, the lifetime. Shifting grading practices had a direct impact on educational equity in that it fought

against the definition of student identity as their performance, it shifted away from grading as a form of punishment, and by isolating academic from non-academic factors it became less susceptible to bias.

When moving toward a non-traditional, standards or competency-based, or gradeless assessment policy students have been provided with deeper insight into their learning trajectory and have had the opportunity to link their understanding of concepts or development of skills directly to their grade or aligned feedback. This approach has supported the development of student identities that have reflected deeper understanding of who they are as learners rather than performers. “Students perceived self-competence is supported in multiple way through authentic assessment practices. Intrinsic motivations are supported when other students experience competence in relation to a particular engagement with an activity (Thomas & Oldfather, 1997, p. 17). When the script shifts from student as a grade toward student as a learner a more equitable environment has been created. Assessing purely on academic skill progression created the space for bias removal that came from the inclusion of non-academic behaviors. After having discussed the meaning behind at the middle school level,

Students shared that, “It doesn’t really tell you that much.” Unfortunately, as Marcel, a seventh grader pointed out, grades do tell many students a great deal about who they are. “It’s like, ‘okay, that grade, that’s me. I am the grade. I did that. That’s my grade. That’s me.’ (Thomas & Oldfather, 1997, p. 14)

With the recognition that the grades students earn or receive, depending on the system, link directly to the social construction of identity for youth there came a responsibility for educators to consider the ways in which their grading and assessment policies were inappropriately defining who students were as people and performers versus providing them the insight need to

progress as learners. A more equitable environment for all learners was created when educators were able to separate grading policy and feedback toward academic skill and conceptual competence from compliance and behavioral measures. Unfortunately, traditional systems of grading and assessment have continued to perpetuate harm by having created definite immovable defined measures of who a youth is in the school building. “Although grades should definitely reflect the quality of students’ academic performance, many teachers believe that students’ work habits, responsibility, and attitudes are also important” (Winger, 2005, p. 4). Tony Winger elevated a central point in the inequitable systems created by traditional approaches to grading and policy in that educators have historically been presented as the power in the room and in order to create spaces of educational equity there must be a power and a dynamic shift in which educators can no longer wield grading and assessment as a tool for punishment where they believe work habits or attitudes do not align to their individual expectations.

Grading as a form of punishment sounds harsh and it is doubtful that any educator when asked about their grading and assessment policies and practices would correlate their approach to a punitive measure. However, we know that, “grades can have a profound and positive impact on a student’s sense of achievement, acting as goals that provide motivation to engage productively with, go deeper into, or push beyond course material” (Saddler, 2009, p. 11) when linked exclusively to academic measures. When grades are tied to behavioral or compliance-based measures, educator discretion and individualized beliefs have yielded systems of assessment that punish students for the ways in which they show up to the classroom.

Grading serves indirect purposes. It is a source of power for many teachers. As the professional developer whose program we studied told us: “Sometimes it’s how they

handle disrespect from students. Even if the fault is their classroom management or if they're insecure about their knowledge, they can still use the grade as their sword and shield. (Olsen & Buchannan, 2019, p 7)

Consider a classroom where students had been asked to complete a do-now activity, classwork and submit homework. In this scenario Student A has shown up to school on time, neatly completed the do-now and received a check for that task. Student A then completes the classwork alongside their peers and the educator notes their engagement and completion of the task earning them another check. Finally, Student A submits their homework from the previous night. The grade recorded for the day is 100% or 3/3 or a full grade for that day. Student B was late to class missing the do-now activity. They completed the classwork and engaged in the discussion of that work with their classmates. Student B did not hand in their homework from the previous night. Depending on the grading and assessment system, Student B may have earned a 1/3 or a 30-40% for the day in the gradebook. However, when examining closer Student B's classwork demonstrated an understanding of the skill whereas Student A had some profound misconceptions about the topic. In this hypothetical traditional system, Student B has been punished for lateness and for not completing a homework assignment. These two measures were both non-academic and may have been caused by socio-economic or socio-political situations, such as housing insecurity, that have deep systemic roots tied to inequitable access to education for our students. Neither Student A nor B left the classroom with deeper understanding of who they were as learners, but Student B understands that how they were able to engage in their education is not enough. Educators, schools and districts have created policies that punish students for elements beyond their control under the guise of an academic grade. Punitive policies can go even further when students have been asked to leave the classroom due to



behavior, during suspensions and when students have been marked down for being disruptive or not completing work in the order or fashion desired by the educator. It is true that, “grades possess integrity when they are true representations of student academic achievement in courses” (Sadler, 2009, p. 15). In order to ensure educational equity there must be continual reflective practices embedded at all levels of policy creation and implementation to center grading and assessment on academic skill and remove non-academic factors that lead to punitive policies and elevate the opportunity for educator bias, whether conscious or unconscious, to sneak in. It became increasingly clear that negative reactions to proposed shifts in grading, “point out how grades function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a way to report information about performance” (Kohn, 2011, p. 24). Grading as punishment, as nonsensical as it may sound, has been systemically ingrained in the practices and pedagogies aligned with traditional grading and assessment; in order to break with those pedagogies there must be a willingness to counter systems that produce biased and inequitable educational environments.

With moving toward equitable grading and assessment it was essential to recognize where nonacademic factors as incorporated into a student’s grade or into the broader grading policy created space for educator or systemwide bias. This meant recognizing the social identity of the educator and the impact an individual’s socialized beliefs and expectations had on planning and implementation in the classroom. It was important to elevate how unconscious bias might be driving policy as, “many factors can potentially bias instructors’ grading of students (e.g., previous educational performance, ethnic or racial group membership, differences or similarities in attitudes or values)” (Hicks, et al., 2024, p. 9). It has been presumed that educators have the ability to separate their external beliefs about people, systems and approaches from the way they show up in the classroom however when policy is created that allows for grading of

nonacademic factors such as “neat work”, “timely return of assignments”, “attentiveness”, or “positive attitude” one can easily see how bias based in social identity such as race, cultural, sexuality, language, economic positionality, or religion may show up.

How we assess strongly influences how we “see” children and their potential and, subsequently, how we make decisions about ways to support their learning. How we assess conveys our beliefs and values about what knowledge counts and how ways of coming to knowing are recognized. These messages have consequences for student actions; for their concepts of themselves as learners, readers, and writers; and for their intrinsic interests in literacy learning (Thomas & Oldfather, 1997, p. 16).

Youth have been facing multiple systems and have grappled with the definition of themselves as people based on a singular averaged measure of achievement that traditionally was tied into how they show up to school, their positivity around compliance, the way in which they expressed their beliefs and understanding and other nonacademic factors. Without supporting educators in having recognized that many of the policies that have felt traditionally sound, such as assigning a grade of zero for missing or late work, inadvertently allow for biases to creep into the educational environment. A student who has missed much of their homework assignments or who is consistently late or absent from school may be labeled uncaring or uninterested in their academic development however with the opportunity to demonstrate academic competence over compliance may rise to the occasion with the understanding of how to engage in a necessary learning trajectory. Equitable grading and assessment are necessary to support all students and these policies can only be implemented in environments that strive toward holistic educational equity.

Grading bias is systemic, and often manifests itself in some form of partiality which certain categories of students and penalizes others on grounds other than achievement. Bias may result from assessors' particular inclinations or points of view that dispose them towards or against certain students who may: display certain traits or attitudes such as cooperativeness and willingness to contribute to class discussions); belong to particular ethnic, religious, racial, cultural or socio-economic groups; or have reputations of previous achievements ('this is an A+ student') (Sadler, 2009, p. 11).

It was important to recognize that bias in grading linked to nonacademic factors was not exclusively harmful to students who already were historically marginalized by systemic inequities and were considered to not be "doing the right thing" in class, but that bias-based grading was particularly damaging to students considered to be well-behaved and compliant. This was because these students received little to no attention based on their academics they received average or above average grades in classes but did not build the conceptual understanding necessary to pass standardized tests, progress confidently in the next stage of their academic career or full engage in academic discourse about their own progressions of learning. Additionally, complicating the discussion were the inequitable nature of standardized tests and college admission processes as they tie into systems of grading and assessment at the K-12 level. Recognizing that, "if grades are based on state standard, there's particular reason to be concerned since those standards are often too specific, age-inappropriate, superficial, and standardized by definition" (Khon, 2011, p. 20) meant understanding that grading and assessment policies and practices were intertwined in an inequitable system, the dismantling of which was necessary for the creation of greater educational equity but challenged by traditional approach, mindset and seemingly cemented structures.

### The impact of shifting away from traditional grading practices

There has been great purpose and intentionality put into the research, planning and implementation across schools, districts and individual classrooms when shifting away from traditional grading practices and toward deeper competency-based or gradeless systems. With this great change came great implications for planning, for mindset, for educator implementation and pedagogy, and for students and school communities. When we thought about the purpose for and inception of grades it was important to recognize that, “grades began as an intimate communication tool among teachers, parents, and students used largely to inform and instruct” (Schneider et al., 2014, p. 27). Ironically, reversing course away from traditional systems of grading and toward more equitable, competency-based systems was necessary to revert back to a system in which grades communicate academic skill and need both to build student metacognition and to guide instruction and pedagogy. When having considered the benefits and drawbacks to shifting away from a traditional, one-hundred point scale with nonacademic factors averaged in, approach to grading toward one that isolates for academics and takes a competency-based approach some clear benefits to implementation arise. These factors consisted of equity for students and staff, student metacognition and a centering of academic development. Conversely roadblocks to implementation, of course, existed as shifting practice took overcoming elements like staff and district mindset, a longstanding structural history, and the traditions and policy deeply aligned with traditional approaches to grading.

Shifting to competency-based or gradeless policies surrounding grading and assessment has resulted in greater educational equity for youth across the schools and districts who have engaged in deep change work.

When we think of education and why we educate children in our society, we tend to say things like, “we educate so that children will become lifelong learners, people who cherish the pursuit of truth, who will become creative and original, tolerant and open to conflicting ideas.” Such statements are part and parcel of our intellectual heritage.

Unfortunately, many of the practices in modern compulsory schooling violate such ideals – and one of the biggest violators, I found, was the ubiquitous practice of grading student’s work.” (Morrison, 2003, p. 9)

Having moved away from grading practices that haphazardly combine both academic and non-academic factors has allowed schools to connect back to the learning and to support student metacognition surrounding their own learning processes and trajectories. This shift in policy necessitated aligned shifts in planning and pedagogy which, in turn, allowed students to peek deep into the process. Transparency creates both trust and understanding and when linked to grading and assessment policies and practices supported student access and ownership.

Arguably, the greatest positive impact connected with the institution of more competency or proficiency-based grading and assessment practices has been the resulting teaching practices and the creation of more deeply equitable schooling as a result of interconnected practices and pedagogies.

Decades of research point to indisputable evidence that grading penalties are far less effective than feedback and personalized learning. Responsive teaching has always

reacted to the needs of learners over the agendas of teachers: it is less about delivering a grade than about delivering timely, accurate, and specific feedback (Reeves, 2004, p. 16). It was imperative that practices result from policy and that grading practices and policies align to student-centered teaching that fostered educational equity, student metacognition specifically about their learning practice and shift toward a focus on academic development isolated from other work habits, attitudes and behaviors. The benefits of the shifting grading and assessment and policy have been linked to both educator improvement and student academic improvement. As one educator shared, “the idea of throwing out my gradebook and becoming gradebook and becoming gradeless was intriguing, exciting and also horrifying all at the same time. The gradeless classroom is based on an endless feedback loop between the teacher and student” (Hunt, 2019, p. 13). In this case, the resulting pedagogy from a shift in grading policy created a learning environment with deeper academic communication between the student and the teacher. This educator also noted that, “my students are taking more chances and many times, are teaching each other new skills” (Hunt, 2019, p. 14). The positive implementation effects of shifting toward more equitable grading practices resulted in a more beneficial learning environment for all students which included enhanced feedback, deeper communication and more opportunities for shared learning. Zooming in on academic skill and progression toward proficiency in grading policy and practice allows for shifts in pedagogy and classroom engagement that many educators already seek out when searching to improve their practice.

After having reflected on the challenges to competency-based assessment and policy implementation it was important to recognize was that much of what was standing in the way was personalized belief and a leaning into a system perpetuating harm as it is easier to continue without disrupting than to dismantle and start again.

As one might expect, making such a profound change to a long-established system of evaluation comes with disadvantages. In addition to significant pushback from students and their families, teachers may also encounter resistance from colleagues or school leaders. In this country, educators have grown accustomed to the concept of reaching accountability through grades and test scores, and there is a widespread perception that grades are an indispensable data point in determining success (Plotinsky, 2022, p. 4).

Education is a system, similar to the many others in our society, that was built on inequitable structures and cemented in the minds of many practitioners as a functional set of structures needing occasional but not overhauled reform. Education is a system made up of humans who had experienced education themselves resulting in socialized experiences that bind educators to historical practices regardless of their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, many educators have fallen into the trap of believing that punitive grading should be the chief consequence for poor decisions and negative behaviors. These teachers continue to argue that grading as punishment works, despite over 100 years of overwhelming research that suggests it does not (Guskey, 2011; Reeves, 2010). Just because a student does her homework doesn't mean that she did so to avoid a grading penalty. As Guskey's (2011) extensive research shows, students do not perform better when they know that it counts (Duek, 2014, p. 21).

Shifting mindset while competing with complex histories is no small feat and this represented a huge obstacle in the implementation of and authentic use of competency or proficiency-based grading policies and practices. When working in a system with such deep roots it was important to recognize the barrier of backward movement due to these histories as well as the personalized experiences and beliefs of individual educators and administrators. A

challenge to implementation has been educator belief and mindset which has been proven to outweigh research-based understandings. For example, there has been much research surrounding the impact of averaging behavioral and perception-based elements into a final academic score as the resulting grade provided little information on student proficiency in the topic and instead serves as a punitive measure against behaviors or work habits that the educator had deemed to be lacking in the student performance. When educators were asked how to respond to students who do not complete their work, “the most common answer is to punish these students. Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, there is an almost fanatical belief that punishment through grades will motivate students” (Reeves, 2004, p. 19). Enacting and implementing shifts to grading practices and policies relies on aligned shifts in planning and pedagogies this results in the need to overcome historical, experiential and belief-based obstacles. Educators, schools and districts have needed to see and experience the impact of shifting toward a more proficiency-based system in order to both better engage in and deeply believe in the need for and impact of the policy shift.

#### Best practices for competency-based grading systems.

Competency-based grading, like all forms of policy and their implementation, can only be as strong as the beliefs, planning and implementation behind them. It was found that six core beliefs and actions throughout implementation turned up as recurring themes when effectively implementing competency-based assessment policies and practices. These buckets include an understanding that:

- Learning is not competitive



- Power shifts and role shifts must occur between educator and youth
- Learning outcomes are the line of connectivity
- Timely, focused and aligned feedback must have been present
- Assessments must be a chance to demonstrate learning
- Transparency must be centered

Each of these beliefs represent a series of aligned best practices and pedagogical approaches that would be implemented with equitable grading practices and policies.

In traditional environments where students grades consist of an average of both academic and non-academic measures we see that there is a centering of compliance and performance. This centering has created environments in which students internalize and construct elements of their identities that are interconnected with the grades they receive in each classroom. Statements such as, “I am a C student” or “I am not a science person” have the potential to become subconscious beliefs embedded in students. As elements of their identities a ranking system then has been created that forces students to compete against each other not only to be the best academically but also to be better than their peers when it comes to the behaviors, work habits and attitudes that are swept up into that final grade. In a competency-based system of grading and aligned policy it is best practice to recognize and create the aligned environments through which learning is no longer competitive. This means that assessment and feedback must center individual student proficiency and understanding. Students must be tasked with understanding, “because it is understanding that makes learning meaningful, relevant, and enduring. A standards-based approach does not go far enough. We must assess for understanding” (Winger, 2009, p. 5). When individual students have been provided with assessment opportunities that gauge their understanding of concepts and progress within skills that learning can be internalized

and personalized as part of the student's individual learning process. This shift allows a student to refocus on their own learning, this is connected to the benefit of student metacognition, instead of comparing the letter or number received to their peers in the classroom.

In the previous section a central benefit named of shifting toward more equitable grading and assessment policies and practices was the rippling impact of change on practice and pedagogy from individual educators. A core tenant that supports best practice in the implementation of a more competency-based system is a dynamic shift of the roles in the classroom. The power must shift from a teacher as knower to one in which teacher and student knowledge are seen as equally beneficial and valuable in the classroom. An element of this occurs with a shift to meaningful grading practices that align exclusively with academic measures carefully isolated from non-academic elements. When grading and assessment have been considered meaningful and academically aligned we have seen a shift in the power dynamic in the classroom or school building because grading is no longer punitive. By focusing on academic skill progression and removing factors like behavior or participation the educator no longer holds the power of subjectively assessing students based on their own standards of engagement and of being. "The first step in sound classroom assessment practices associated with grading is to ensure that grades are meaningful" (Guskey & Munoz, 2015, p. 16). When grading and assessment practices demonstrate student proficiency and can support feedback conversations that articulate a learning trajectory they can be considered meaningful to students. This represents a shift from teacher holding the power to determine where a student should be and go to the student possessing the understanding of where they started, where they currently stand and seeking to understand alongside their educator where to go next in order to progress toward mastery in a specific skill or concept.

Central to ensuring a shift toward more equitable grading practices and policies is understanding that students must be assessed and supported in building proficiency within a set of standards or skill-aligned learning outcomes. “The first step in any standards-based reporting is to develop a deep understanding of the student learning standards. From this, educators can develop the critical strands of standards that will be meaningful for reporting” (Guskey & Munoz, 2015, p. 17). Learning outcomes should connect all that students do from learning to assessment in the classroom. It has become the responsibility and the role of the educator to recognize those cross-cutting skills and enduring understandings that support student success within the mountain of standards set out in a course scope and sequence. When educators have built a strong set of learning outcomes through which students can both see their own progression and receive aligned feedback the resulting practice effectively supports youth in understanding the developmental progression over the course of a unit, semester or a year’s worth of curriculum. Learning outcomes, and grading only learning outcomes, centralizes learning and understanding as the purpose within a classroom. When educators center, “measuring students’ compliance and their ability to recall facts, our practices will interfere with our most significant purposes as educators. If we are to shift our focus to higher-level thinking, we must shift our grading practices” (Winger, 2009, p. 3). When educators shift to creating learning outcomes and exclusively assessing those outcomes as part of their grading and assessment practice the impact is a removal of nonacademic factors and deepened pedagogical understanding of where compliance and recall are valued over learning in practice.

In order to shift grading and assessment practices educators have to have recognized feedback as part of the grading and assessment process. Feedback must be ingrained in policy, planning and practice. “All grading and reporting should start by having a clear purpose,

followed by an in-depth understanding of the various criteria that can be used. Equally important is the effort to explicitly link curriculum standards with grading and reporting systems” (Muoz & Guskey, 2015, p. 14). When linking learning outcomes to grading policy they transformative measure of practice was actually being explicit about the link and how student skills were supported in progressing overtime across the course of the school year or the unit. This level of connectivity in expression, as a best practice, must come in the form of tailored and timely feedback to students. It was critical to student success when implementing more equitable assessment and grading practices that students understood where they were in a skill and how they would be supported in or could independently build proficiency in that skill overtime. This meant that feedback had to be continual, thoughtfully aligned and shared regularly between educator and student.

Another critical best practice when implementing proficiency or competency-based grading practices and polices has been ensuring that assessments are a chance for students to demonstrate learning. Many classrooms have created dynamics in which students can earn extra points on assessments based on compliance or behavioral measures creating inaccurate measures of learning in final grades and even in feedback. Students, in traditional settings, have been able to receive higher grades based on the character traits of cooperativeness and willingness to comply in the classroom and with an educators desired expectations. However, classroom assessments and final grades have proven to be disconnected from student understanding when student grades in a course and their results on standardized testing have been compared. This was magnified during a study across eleven Kentucky high schools.

[T]he results of this research study indicated that the use of standards-based grading with PP classrooms increased the association between grades and standardized test scores

among students with the 11 high schools that implemented the program. Students who were more successful in the content class that used the standards-based grading were more likely to score proficient on the KCCT assessment than students evaluated on traditional grading practices. The most significant finding to refute traditional grading methods derived from the 75% of students who received above average traditional grades in their specific content class, yet scored below proficient on the corresponding KCCT assessment. When evaluated by standards-based grading, nearly twice as many students scored proficient when successful in their core content class” (Hochbein & Pollio, 2015, p. 9).

Effective practices surrounding the implementation of competency-based grading assessment and policy were centered in the assurance that every assessment that a student has experienced in the classroom has been an opportunity to measure learning and understanding. This created environments in which nonacademic measures did not influence student grades which, in turn, allowed assessment to demonstrate student understanding and progression within skills and concepts. This not only painted a picture for students, educators and families of where a student was, is currently and where they hoped to go but also closed the gaps between standardized assessment results and classroom grades.

As a final note, one practice that seemed interwoven into each of the described practices in this section was the recognition that transparency must be centered. In an environment that effectively implements competency-based grading and assessment students are privy to full understanding of the learning process, the trajectory of skills and have access to and understanding of the educator’s gradebook. Traditional grading centers on a 100-point system in which 50% of those numbers are failing grades and a lack of completion results in an average-

altering 0/100. The lack of mathematical sense and clarity in this approach has left many students feeling destined to fail given the lack of transparency surrounding the purpose behind grading practices. When students understand the learning objectives that are being assessed and they have been trusted to learn about how those objectives and skills will support their learning they have been able to grasp the purpose of assessment and why not everything should live in an educators gradebook.

When teachers reduce or eliminate grades, the benefits can be vast and enduring. For one thing, removing the emphasis on a number or a letter forces everyone to focus on the reason we go to school: to learn. In addition, the increased emphasis on reaching specific targets helps home instruction more directly toward student needs (Plotinsky, 2022, p. 11).

There has been a need for enhanced transparency in order to create environments in which more equitable grading policies can be lived in planning, practice and pedagogy. When students understand why they are learning, what they are learning and how they can gain greater proficiency and then can see that reflected in the assessment and feedback practices within the classroom they are empowered to take greater ownership of their learning. This ownership manifests itself in deeper student metacognition on learning progression and greater educational equity as individual student understanding is centralized,

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discover the implications of shifting toward more accurate and equitable grading practices in school and district communities on student metacognition. Additionally, the study aimed to explore equity implications resulting from adjustments to grading policy and practice. In the study, there was consideration of the impact, whether that be positive or negative, on the education environment when shifting away from traditional grading policy and aligned practices. Lastly, the study aimed to uncover best practices for implementation of a competency-based grading system.

The field of education is continually grappling with the concept of cognitive challenge and the mission to ensure students are prepared to engage in post-secondary education or citizenship. In order to support youth in recognizing and actualizing their next steps as individuals it has been essential to build student metacognition and the ability to speak to their learning progress and proficiency. This has necessitated a shift in educator approach to and beliefs around rigor and assessment. Shifting to grading policy and practice that provide students multiple opportunities for assessment of singular skills and ensuring pedagogues are providing youth with aligned feedback on their progress and proficiency in grasping those skills deepens student metacognition. Once shifted to a policy which grades student skills or content-standards the implications for student understanding of learning progress are monumental in that students are armed with the ability to navigate their own learning trajectory, understand where they sit in pathway toward proficiency, and are supported in articulating and understanding how to deepen their own learning to reach competency.

The history of education is wrought with inequitable structures and systems, including the origins of grading, assessment and student placement. In deciding to shift toward competency-based grading policies and practices the implications for educational equity have enabled classrooms, schools and districts to develop deepened relationships with students and families as their academic conversations centered student learning instead of incorporating traditional measures such as behavior, participation or general compliance. This move has created systems of grading and assessment that are bias-resistant and accurate to what a student knows and can do in the classroom. Historically, students marginalized by social identities, particularly Black, Brown, Indigenous and other Students of Color have been subjected to cultural and social norms outside of their lived experience in the classroom. These norms have resulted in inequitable grading systems that average academic performance and student behavior, a highly subjective determination. The shift toward more equitable, skills-aligned grading practices and policies removes the biased-based elements of a student's record that do not speak to their understanding of skills and concepts resulting in a more learning focused-equitable environment.

The largest deterrent at the school, classroom or district level to shifting toward competency-based grading practices and policies aligns with educator experience, mindset and receptivity to change. In order to shift policy and practice there must be an aligned shift in the traditional power dynamic across classrooms in which students are engaged as partners in the learning and the grading systems and structures are transparent to students and families beyond the walls of the school building. The pedagogical implications are hefty in that they necessitate time, capacity and reflection on the learning process and practice in the classroom on the part of individual educators. However, the benefits to student understanding and ownership of the



learning and their educational experience overall far outweigh the challenges in this case.

Students experience academic success at much higher levels than their traditionally assessed peers resulting from an emphasis on academic skills, feedback to support progress overtime and a consistent pattern of student reflection on learning that comes with a shift toward more equitable grading practices and policies.

Schools and districts that have successfully shifted toward more equitable and accurate grading practices and policies have recognized several core elements as best practice for belief systems and for implementation. Central to the shift is the belief that learning cannot be competitive. Historically, students have been pitted against each other and publicly categorized based on perceived success. Our grading system was designed to identify managers and workers and has created environments in which students see themselves and others as the humanization of their letter grade. Shifting away from this has allowed for spaces of collective learning, meaning making and exploration which has proven to enhance academic outcomes as students seek to make sense of concepts within the classroom. Additionally, in order to actualize more equitable grading systems there must be a power and role shift between educators and students in which educators no longer see themselves as controlling the narrative in the classroom and instead see their power lying in the feedback provided to students to facilitate deeper learning and progression within skills and standards. In order to accurately and equitably assess students schools and educators must delineate necessary skills and use those to guide their lessons and provide students opportunity to engage in aligned assessment to demonstrate learning. A shift toward competency-based grading and assessment must center transparency at all levels of implementation and cannot be considered a light task in any setting. In future studies, it would benefit the field of education to understand better the implications on educator development and

students' academic achievement when equitable grading and assessment are present and consistent across districts for the career of an individual student's education.

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