Standards-Based Assessment and Grading — *Brad Kuntz* [handwritten]

In the Classroom with

Brad Kuntz

Focus on Learning, Not Grades

I used to hear this often from students: "I didn't do very well on the test. Is there any extra credit I can do to raise my grade?" Or: "I'm so close to a *B* in class, how can I earn some more points?" Less often did students inquire about improving upon a particular component of the unit's content.

The past decades of education have trained students and teachers to focus on grades rather than learning. Unfortunately, grades are generally an account of points earned through various activities that are influenced by artificial deadlines, grade inflation, extra credit, and subjectivity. It's time for us to change the student mind-set currently focused on reaching a particular percentage and instead empower them to take charge of their learning and measure their own success.

Proficiency-based education focuses on specific learning targets and the demonstration of a student's proficiency with the content. It allows students multiple opportunities to prove their understanding, and incorporates flexibility for individual learners rather than pushing all students through the content at the same pace regardless of their comprehension of the material. It creates a partnership between the teacher and student with regard to a student's progress, and it increases a student's ownership of her own learning. At that point, grades actually do indicate what a student has learned and is able to do.

Although entire schools are discussing transitioning to a similar system, it's possible for individual teachers to include the core concepts of proficiency-based learning immediately. First, condense all of the standards you teach into a manageable set of learning targets phrased in a way students can understand. Provide students with a checklist of these targets. Review the targets daily to remind students which ones were covered previously and which ones you'll be working with today. Refer to these targets each time you cover new material. Label all homework and classroom activities with a learning target so students understand the focus and can refer to the appropriate notes for a reminder of how to work with the content.

Engage students in a conversation about what it means to demonstrate proficiency. Give them opportunities to show proficiency with each target as you move through a unit. If a student does not meet a satisfactory level of performance on one target, provide another opportunity, rather than simply recording a poor quiz score in the gradebook and moving on. Before attempting the assessment again, however, the student must come in for additional support, prove he's practiced more, or complete some enrichment activity so that he's not just trying again before he's ready. When students show proficiency on each learning target throughout the unit, they can move to the final assessment of that unit.

With a proficiency-based learning system, teachers can more accurately pinpoint which concepts an individual student is struggling with. It gives order and structure to the content, like a path on a map. Students can clearly see what is expected of them, they can monitor their progress through a unit, and they can self-evaluate their comprehension as they prepare for assessments. If implemented well, a student will no longer ask for extra credit, but rather for an opportunity to demonstrate that she understands the content. She will know exactly what to do in order to reach her academic goals. For the teacher, you can finally speak with your students about their learning rather than their points!

Brad Kuntz teaches Spanish and environmental leadership at Gladstone High School in Gladstone, Ore., and is a 2011 winner of ASCD's Outstanding Young Educator Award.

Video: Brad Kuntz shows how he uses project-based learning to engage students in environmental leadership. To watch the video, use your smartphone to scan the QR code.

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