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Implementation of a Standards-Based Grading Model: A Study of Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Success

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Implementation of a Standards-Based Grading Model:
A Study of Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Success

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. Standards-based grading meets all criteria for a problem of practice. The literature situates standards-based grading as a high impact strategy that can affect the entire system. This mixed-methods study will be used to determine practical changes for a school implementing standards-based grading. This study found parents positively responded to the change, and parents understood their child's current performance levels. Teachers also positively responded to the change, but had a much larger change involved. The study specifically found that better tools and assessments were needed to successfully implement the program. Suggestions for practitioners and modifications to the program are included in the study.

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To my cohort who became more than just classmates, but also true friends and colleagues: I could never have done this without you! You are all amazing educators, and I learned so much from you. I am blessed to call you colleagues because I know you do the right things for kids each day.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who always made me feel my dreams were possible. They believed in reaching your dreams and dreaming big. They helped me believe Eleanor Roosevelt, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” They taught me that failure isn’t fatal and persistence pays off. Not only did I learn from them as parents, but as educators who navigated this changing, and at times frustrating, world of “school.” I learned from them that every child counts and that sometimes it takes more than what we think we have to give. I learned that this isn’t an eight to three job, and you don’t put it away when you go home. I learned what it means to truly love educating. Words can’t express my gratitude and love for these amazing people.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. Higher Elementary School houses four sections of grades two and three. They are a feeder school for Center School, which houses grades four through eight. Little Learners School feeds Higher Elementary and houses preschoolers through first graders. Issues with the current system of reporting student learning took center stage at Higher Elementary School in the 2014-15 school year. Previously, student grading at Higher was based on the traditional letter grade system of A, B, C, D, and F. In contrast, students at Little Learners School used a skills-based reporting system. In 2014-15, educators at Higher Elementary began reporting the following concerns regarding the current state of affairs related to the reporting of student performance:

- Some parents seemed unaware or confused about the individual learning skills that students had mastered.
- Students' reported grades in the traditional system were polluted by corrections, work completed as a class or in groups, work habits, a teacher's efforts to help students finish work, and reduction in the quantity or difficulty of problems on an assignment.
- Special education students received excellent scores due to the large amount of extra assistance given or changes made to the content. These grades led to confusion by hiding a student's true abilities. Then, in later years, parents became confused when it became obvious the child was not working at the level suggested by the letter grade. Teachers in grade three and above, whose students previously were given letter grades, received

incoming student grades that showed an A and B student, but their level of learning was significantly different than those grades led teachers to believe. In essence, these students' grades were not a reflection of their learning on grade level standards, but, rather, a grade based upon modifications or work habits.

- Teachers, students, and parents were, at times, more concerned about the grade students received instead of the learning objectives and work habits of the student. It seemed as soon as teachers utilized letter grades, instead of the skills-based report card, the focus shifted from the learning to the letter grade given.

These issues prompted a discussion with staff that indicated a willingness to look at other options for reporting student learning. Early in the 2014-15 school year, teachers at Higher envisioned a desired state that included the following:

- A reporting system that accurately reflects a student's current performance levels on grade level standards;
- A reporting system easily understood by parents;
- A reporting system that accounts for students with significant needs;
- A reporting system that aligns with current assessments and standards; and,
- A reporting system with common reporting guidelines that equalize grading and assessment between classes in the same grade level.

This desired state became the goals of the standards-based grading initiative, along with goals focused on instruction and assessment based upon related literature. Specifically, those goals were:

- Maintain a grading system that accurately reflects a student's current level of performance, including academic standards, social skills, and work habits;

- Communicate accurately and succinctly to parents regarding their child's current levels of performance in an understandable format;
- Accurately reflect the learning of students with special needs;
- Align the grading system with the standards currently required by the state of Kansas and ensure assessments align with the grading system and standards;
- Ensure reporting of students' current levels of performance are as consistent as possible across the grade level and between teachers; and,
- Focus instruction on the needs of individual students to increase student learning.

The plan of action for moving to this desired state included a three-year phasing-in process. In 2014-15, teachers in the second grade identified standards and created a pilot grade card. During this process, teachers discussed assessments utilized by all teachers at the grade level to accurately report student progress. In 2015-16, the pilot grade card was utilized at the second grade. During the year, second grade teachers formally created the common assessments used to determine students' current levels of performance and collaborated throughout the year regarding how to accurately mark individual students' level of learning at a given time. This study began during this second year and focused on studying the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of the standards-based report card and identified recommendations for adjustment and possible professional development needs. Also during the pilot year of implementation, third grade teachers worked through the process of selecting standards and building their grade cards. Finally, in 2016-17 teachers in both grade levels implemented the new grade cards utilizing modifications from this study.

This study provided actionable items for the staff at Higher Elementary as they worked to modify and adjust their student reporting system, moving from a traditional form of letter grades

to a stronger focus on student learning. Standards-based grading practices are on the rise in schools across the nation, with varying levels of success. This study seeks to not only inform local educators, but also any schools attempting standards-based reporting. Other educators may utilize the practices and suggestions from this study to inform their program decisions and implementation.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. This study is a problem of practice, based deeply in my work as an educational leader. It is intended to have deep impact on my current leadership experience as well as impact for other practicing educational leaders. Problems of practice include a focus on five major categories. A problem of practice must:

- Focus on instructional or systematic issues;
- Be directly observable;
- Be actionable;
- Connect to a broader strategy of improvement; and,
- Be high leverage.

Focuses on Instructional/Systematic Issues

At Higher Elementary, grades remain an important structure for teachers, students, and parents. However, this structure came under scrutiny the last few years due to its inability to truly convey what a student has or has not learned. A review of current formative assessments at

the onset of this study indicated an alignment with current standards and assessments; however, grades did not reflect this same alignment with standards. Grades in the letter-format typically reflect work habits, responsibility skills, assessments, practice, and extra credit. For teachers to truly report accurate levels of performance on current standards, changes had to be made.

At the elementary level, the previous grading structure was historical in nature and suited more for the high school level. Educators favoring standards-based grade cards insist parents and teachers need to be more concerned about what a student learns, rather than a percentage grade (Brookhart, 2011; Deddeh et al., 2010; Scriffiny, 2008). Great Schools (n.d.) define a standards-based report card as one that, “lists the most important skills students should learn in each subject at a particular grade level... Instead of letter grades, students receive marks that show how well they have mastered the skills” (p.1). As teachers change the way they report student learning, teachers must also wrestle as a team with topics that relate to grades, such as assessment, re-teaching, and differentiated instruction. Teacher collaboration around topics of learning has the potential to significantly improve learning across the grade level and across classrooms.

Directly Observable

As previously discussed, Higher Elementary School educators directly observed several issues in relation to grading procedures. Grading at Higher Elementary School is a directly observable practice that happens at least four times each year. Prior to standards-based grading, teachers engaged in this practice daily as they worried about helping students complete or correct work in order to raise grades. They worked diligently to create assignments so that one assignment did not significantly impact a percentage grade. Groups of teachers engaged repeatedly in conversations regarding which assignments should be included in the percentage

grade. However, even with all these processes, the actual process of how a teacher identified a grade is subjective. Teachers within their own classrooms decide which assignments to put into the final grade, how to handle incomplete work, and whether to allow corrections. There are even portions of standards-based grading that could be argued are subjective as well. For example, responsibility skills and work habits are an important part of our standards-based report cards. The process for assigning scores to these areas will not be backed by an official assessment score. While a number might not be assigned, this is an observable measure in various ways, such as discipline referrals, completed homework, and true observation. The assigning of grades is an observable process, whether in academic areas backed by numeric data or in work habits and responsibility skills backed by observation data.

Even with these changes, true observation of success in standards-based grading, as with any other grading system, lies in conversations with parents and teachers. These conversations are the reason this problem has been identified in the first place, so it makes sense that the success or failure of the process will be identified through conversations and actions of teachers and parents.

Actionable

During discussions with educational leaders early in the process, many districts jumped feet first into an under-developed model of standards-based grading many years ago. These districts failed to have deep conversations about purpose and validity. This is not the direction desired by Higher Elementary staff. The proposal included spending the 2014-15 school year developing the process, measurable objectives, and assessments. During the fall semester, staff and administration utilized research, parent interviews, and other districts currently using this model to guide the direction for a systematic model. During the first semester, a conversation

with the school board was held to determine if the school board also identified this as a problem and supported changes to the current system. The school board strongly supported the school in looking at alternative methods of grading. They went so far as to suggest this as a process for all grade levels. Because many of them have direct ties to the high school, they discussed the inflation of grades even at that level. This conversation led me to believe that, while the school board did not directly identify the problem itself, they see the issue as a problem that needs to change.

During the second semester, second grade teachers worked through the process and developed a pilot grade card. Administration's efforts focused on educating parents in the process and continuing to work with the school board to receive approval for the new model. In the year 2015-16, second grade teachers reported student learning using the new process, while third grade teachers used real-time feedback from the pilot to develop their reporting system. Second grade teachers adjusted their pilot model at the end of the year to reflect feedback gained in this study. In 2016-17, the new standards-based grading system will be fully implemented at Higher Elementary School.

Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement and the School's Action Plan

This school district, like most school districts, continues to have goals in place to increase the involvement of parents in their child's education. These goals include a significant push away from just wanting parents to attend events and do homework, but to be an active participant in their child's education. This new level of reporting will allow parents to monitor their child's specific learning and also the work habits of their child. Higher Elementary School currently utilizes a Multi-Tiered System of Supports, which works specifically with children on missing indicators. A reporting method designed around reporting specific learning objectives allows

teachers to track exactly which objectives might need re-teaching for individual students. The state of Kansas has also set a goal of having students ready for college or career at the end of high school. In fact, the new state standards are called the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards (Communications Toolkit, 2013). If teachers begin reporting to parents how well their child is performing on these standards and focus instruction there, students are one step closer to being college and career ready.

High-Leverage

Reeves (2011) speaks of standards-based grading as a “high-leverage strategy” (p. 79) that impacts all areas of the learning system. Reporting specific learning focuses teachers and parents on the goal of student growth. However, if developed correctly, this structure also has the ability to put grade level teachers on the same page regarding what constitutes mastery. During initial conversations at Higher Elementary School, teachers voiced specific concerns regarding validity, specifically how they will determine mastery on individual objectives. These discussions regarding individual learning objectives fall specifically in the areas suggested by successful professional learning communities. Perhaps the most potential for improvement remains the relationship between teacher and parent. When reporting learning in a standards-based method, the potential is present to have deep conversations about a child’s true learning levels and work habits.

Research Questions

1. **During the pilot year, how has the standards-based report card affected parent/teacher communication? How does the new report card impact parents’ understanding of their child’s performance?** These questions lie at the heart of the

teachers' reasons for desiring a change to the current system of standards-based reporting. The most important goal identified by staff was parent understanding of the current levels of student performance. Therefore, these questions are of significant importance to the staff and administration.

2. **During the pilot year, how has standards-based grading affected teacher instruction and assessment in the classroom?** The literature suggests that the true power behind standards-based grading lies in its impact to other areas, specifically instruction and assessment (Scriffiny, 2008; Erickson, 2011; Cox, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Reeves, 2011). This question is intended to judge this very impact. If student learning is directly related to instruction, then the question becomes, "How does standards-based grading impact instruction?"
3. **How could the processes, procedures, or tools be changed or modified to better serve the needs of parents and teachers?** This question relates strongly to the board of education's interest in accurately assessing students and ensuring grades accurately reflect the current performance of students. During discussions with teachers, they also identified a need to ensure consistent grading across all classrooms within the grade level. This required deep discussion regarding assessment and instruction as well. Thus, this question speaks not only to the grading instrument, but also to the teachers' ability and tools needed to utilize the new grade card. This question also addresses the necessary structures in place for accurately assessing all students' levels of learning, even those with significant delays. During this study, second grade alone implemented the new grade card on a pilot basis. The goal behind the pilot is to correct and fix issues before fully implementing the following year. Therefore, this question is extremely important to

teachers and administrators. However, it is also extremely broad and may lead to a variety of areas for improvement. Each year, or at least every few years, teachers must look carefully to see what changes could improve the current grade card.

4. **What pieces of the training, professional development, or communication plan did parents and teachers find most helpful? Would any other communication tools or sessions, training, or professional development be useful?** These questions should be an important aspect of every new change initiative for schools. It plays solidly into the change procedures mentioned previously. The communication early in the process for parents builds capacity with families to help understand their child's progress and how to communicate questions and concerns with teachers. Professional development helps build buy-in, but its most important role is to produce success. When educators have the knowledge and skills to accurately complete a task, they become more confident and willing to attempt the next steps. Those next steps take educators deeper into the process of changing instruction and impacting student learning. These are the overarching goals of most changes in the education system, including the current change in student grades.

Methodology

This study investigated the perceptions of parents and teachers during the pilot year of implementing standards-based grading in the second grade. This was a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews. This evaluation used an explanatory sequential model collecting first quantitative and qualitative data through the use of a survey and using the information gained to modify the semi-structured interview protocols for the large qualitative portion of the study. Data were collected via focus group interviews with parents. The intent was to hold individual interviews with teachers and follow-

up the focus group with individual interviews of parents based upon focus group observations. However, the lack of parent participation limited the study to focus groups for parents and individual teacher interviews. All second grade parents were invited to participate in the focus groups and the survey was sent to every second-grade parent. The intent was to give everyone a voice and the chance to feel involved and connected with the school.

Positionality

Foote and Bartell (2011) define positionality as, “in part, an individual’s worldview” (p. 46). For the purposes of this study, positionality is defined as, not only the worldview of an individual, but also the researcher’s view of the study, its participants, and its impact. This was particularly important, as this study was located within the school where I work and lead. This was a practitioner’s study and, as such, I brought my own thoughts, leadership traits, and opinions to the study. There were also limitations inherent to the study due to the fact I work with these parents and teachers on a daily basis, on a variety of topics and needs. For example, questions for parents must be phrased in an inoffensive way, and are, at times, limited because of acceptable topics, such as education or socioeconomic levels that may cause parents to take offense to the survey itself.

Researcher’s Role

This study was being completed in the school where I serve as the principal. Working within one’s own environment creates a unique study. The processes and procedures for the implementation being studied are a direct result of my decisions and leadership in the building. Therefore, a portion of this study directly evaluates my success at implementing new programs in the building.

As a teacher in a previous school, I utilized standards-based grading and found significant benefits to the process, especially in relation to instruction and communication with parents. As the educational leader in the school, this study had a personal impact for my school and me. The danger of bias becomes a concern when working within one's own school. On the other hand, there is also the benefit of knowing that those with decision-making powers are actively involved in the study and able to implement the findings of the study.

Assumptions

As the educational leader in the building, I supported the implementation of a standards-based grading system from the early stages of the process. My previous experience and review of literature provided an initial assumption that, when done correctly, standards-based grading has the potential to significantly improve parent and school communication and also the instruction that takes place in the classroom (Scriffiny, 2008; Erickson, 2011; Cox, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Reeves, 2011). However, my experiences and the literature also indicate true and lasting change takes significant time and guidance. Therefore, as the leader, I have guided the direction of this study away from simply determining whether the program should be simply continued or discontinued. The building will be continuing standards-based grading. This study was used to determine how to make the program the most successful. Due to my position within the organization, there is also a major assumption that the findings of this study will be utilized within Higher Elementary to make improvements to the current system and inform the implementation of future grade levels.

Definition of Key Terms

Standards- Based Grade Cards: A method of reporting student learning based on their progress toward mastering individual skills. Great Schools (n.d.) define a standards-based report

card as one that, “lists the most important skills students should learn in each subject at a particular grade level...Instead of letter grades, students receive marks that show how well they have mastered the skills” (p.1).

Report Card: An official report of student progress given to parents throughout the year and maintained for student records.

Progress Reports: An informal method of conveying student progress in the middle of each quarter.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): The process utilized by the state of Kansas to identify students needing additional supports academically and behaviorally to be successful students and meet grade level goals. The process involves identifying the level of need and then matching supports to the level of need and the specific skill needing addressed.

Core Blocks: Reading and math instruction in the regular education classroom.

Accommodations: Ways to help students that allow them to access the grade level material, such as reading aloud math assignments or reducing the number of problems on assignments.

Modifications: Changes given to assignments or instruction that raise or lower the grade level expectations. For example, a modification might be asking a student to only answer one-digit addition problems when the grade level expectation is for double-digit problems.

Modified Report Card: Used to identify a grade card where off-grade modifications are made to the curriculum and report card for an individual student to meet his or her needs.

Parent: For the purposes of this paper, a parent refers to the caregiver for the child. In some cases this may be a biological parent, while in other cases may refer to a grandparent, relative, or another person providing primary at-home care for the child.

Organization of the Dissertation

The following chapters delve deeper into the study, sharing specifically the relevant literature and methodology of the study. Chapter two discusses the various and extensive literature regarding the use of standards-based grading. Perhaps the most important thoughts from the literature speak to the importance of schools to do “more of what matters” (Covey, Whitman, & England, 2009, p. 55). The idea of education as a system where all its pieces interact is part of the larger theoretical framework introduced in chapter two. The literature review will also contain analysis of a study regarding the impact of standards-based grading on student achievement. Finally, it will also include items from the literature deemed to be the most important for a successful implementation.

Chapter three discusses the specifics regarding the methodology of the study. Specifically, it discusses the participants of the study and the instruments used for the semi-structured interviews and surveys. Within the chapter is a specific description of the type of study utilized for this study. There is also a more extensive description of how the use of a problem based in current practice affects the selection of participants and survey items for this study.

Chapter four speaks specifically to the findings of the study. It includes results from the parent survey, parent focus groups, and teacher interviews. The chapter discusses return rate of the survey and participation numbers for the focus group and teacher interviews. Within the chapter is a discussion of themes identified through the qualitative portion of the study, as well as quantitative information from the survey.

Finally, chapter five discusses conclusions drawn from the study, especially those relevant to the current staff. It also includes information about the limitations of the study and

implications for other areas of the educational spectrum. The final chapter gives several recommendations for future study both within the current school context and in the larger educational community. Finally, the chapter also gives suggestions for leaders who seek to implement a standards-based grading model within their own building.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. The subject of standards-based grading has a strong foothold in education, and many educators have read and researched the topic. Therefore, as a practitioner with contacts throughout the education field, much of the literature was suggested or shared by colleagues. A search was also done on Ebsco databases with the terms “standards-based grading” and “standards-based reporting” for the broad concepts within the literature review. The terms “change theory,” “systems thinking,” and “growth mindset” were also used as search terms when researching those areas embedded within the topic. Literature reviewed used a variety of sources as presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Types of literature and number reviewed

Type of source	Number reviewed
Peer reviewed articles	20
Scholarly books	9
Scholarly journals	9
Dissertations	7
Scholarly websites	3
Government Reports	5
Scholarly videos	3

Review of the Literature

This chapter identifies the broad topics of study that were utilized prior to report card creation in order to create quality report cards and navigate the change process. These topics will also be used to determine successful implementation and change. The first section highlights the impact grading can have on the system as a whole and, more specifically, how the literature speaks to its ability to be a high-leverage strategy within a system. The following section speaks specifically to the current research's indication for needed change and continues by discussing current change theory. Exceptional learners are discussed in relation to standards-based grading. Finally, the mindful component brings in research from mental health, trauma, and current research on the importance of mindset.

Grading as Part of a System

Education in today's world lives in a perpetual state of crisis. Student needs, society expectations, and accountability are all constantly rising, while budgets and supports are falling. We are in the mountains, as Covey, Whitman, and England (2009) would say. “‘In the mountains,’ it's not enough to do more with less—you need to do more of what matters” (Covey, Whitman, & England, 2009, p. 55). In other words, we need high-leverage strategies that improve multiple areas of the system. Fullen (2010) states, “every successful organization pursues a small number of core priorities (that have high leverage power) and does them exceedingly well” (p. 4). Reeves (2011) connects grading as a part of an entire system that must be changed. He considers this to be a “high-leverage strategy that will, when effectively implemented, help every other element of the system improve” (Reeves, 2011, p. 79). When using a systems thinking frame of reference, it is obvious that even if we get most of it right, “when one part is out of alignment, it affects every other part of the system—for good or ill”

(Reeves, 2011, p. 79). According to Iamarino (2014), “Standards-based grading takes aim both at mediocrity in the classroom and inaccurateness in the gradebook, attempting to reinvigorate education...” (p. 2). Scriffiny (2008) also discusses the many areas of a system over which teachers and administrators have no control. However, Scriffiny points out that the grading system and assessments can be controlled, changed, and modified by teachers and administrators (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 71). Cox (2011) states, “...there remains one arena where few educational leaders and reformers have ventured: classroom grading” (p. 67).

This leads to the more important conversation regarding the impact grading has on a system. Few parts of a school system exist within a single context. The people, programs, and procedures all operate within a larger system, creating links and interactions that affect each area within that system. According to Reeves (2011), “Systems thinking reframes the grading debate from ‘my grading policies for my classroom’ to a collegial responsibility for the decisions of every teacher and administrator in the education system” (p. 79). When looking at programs, particularly during a creation or evaluation phase, personnel must determine the effects to the entire system. Rubenstein-Montano et al. (2001) explains, “Systems thinking is a conceptual framework for problem-solving that considers problems in their entirety” (p. 6). Using the lens of systems thinking, evaluators take into context the complexities of a working system and the effect of individual pieces within that system. Any form of grading is part of the larger system of parent communication, assessment, motivational techniques, and instruction and with a wide range of stakeholders. While many cite a need for change in the American education system, there does not seem to be one fixed answer as Vatterott (2015) emphasizes, “No one has the answer because there isn’t just one answer. It’s a series of related problems that overlap among curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 5). However, Vatterott (2015) also notes that “the

reform of one educational practice—grading—has the potential to drive related changes in other practices” (p. 5).

One of the benefits of using the lens of systems theory during the creation or examination of a program is the ability to address complex situations and the challenges created by this type of situation by focusing on the system as a whole instead of simply an individual component. Systems thinking also provides a way to look at solutions from a more global perspective, “developing innovative ways of understanding [complex situations], indicating unexpected properties and acknowledging the evolutionary nature of the programs” (Grammatikopoulos, 2012, p. 54). We will run into specific challenges interacting in such a complex system. Any recommendations proposed must first be looked at in a way that addresses its strengths and challenges for each part of the system and then, the system as a whole. For example, the greater the specificity and detail of comments the stronger the communication with parents. However, this attention to detail will need to be balanced with its effects on increased teacher time spent on grade cards. If teacher time on grade cards increases, that time must be taken from other tasks, such as planning instruction or working with students. Recommendations cannot only work with isolated portions of the system, but must work within the system as a whole. Specifically, systems thinking looks at the relationship between components and how the components interact with each other (Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001, p. 6).

Systems thinking allows evaluators to determine “what is inside of a system and what is outside (context or environment)” (Hummelbrunner, 2011, p. 396). In terms of standards-based grading, we must consider the context and stakeholders that exist within that context, such as parents, teachers, and students. We also have to understand the external components, such as businesses and policy makers. For example, at times businesses offer incentives for A’s on

grade cards. Using a systems thinking approach, we understand this as an environmental piece of the system and address it as such within an evaluation or program creation.

According to Hummelbrunner (2011), “Contrary to what people often think, systems approaches are not ‘holistic’ in the sense they aim to include everything” (p. 400). Using a systems thinking approach also allows us to set important boundaries. These boundaries identify which portions of the larger system will be included in the study. While systems thinking acknowledges the effects of the whole on individual parts of the system, it also acknowledges the need to identify the boundaries that narrow the study to a manageable task. It would be impossible to truly evaluate the entire system in a school setting due to the vast complexities and areas that are inaccessible, such as policy making at the state or national levels. Therefore, systems thinking approaches set boundaries that clarify the extent of the examination’s reach. It will be necessary to create boundaries within the current study that allow access to the variety of components that provide important information and are directly affected by the study while also finding the limit of an appropriate scope for the project.

Improvement in education is frequently judged based upon student achievement. Therefore, the question becomes: “Does standards-based grading improve student achievement?” Craig (2011) attempted to answer that question during her doctoral dissertation. The author states that the initial reason for the study was to expand the use of standards-based grading into junior high by providing evidence that it positively impacts student achievement. There are three claims made by Craig:

1. There is not a general understanding among practitioners regarding quality standards-based grade cards.

2. There was no evidence that standards-based grading affected student achievement.
3. Removing failing grades may have a positive effect on low-income or special education students' achievement. This may speak to the importance of hope for students in recovering from a failing grade (Craig, 2011).

One major issue in the study lies in the fact that the quality of the report cards observed was not consistent. Therefore, the data supporting the second claim could be challenged based upon the findings of the first claim. There is clear information within Craig's literature review and theoretical framework that speaks to the importance of instruction and assessment. However, this plays no role in the actual research. Instead, the researcher focuses on student achievement and the actual report card document.

While Craig's (2011) study found that there was not an improvement in achievement, a different study suggests that standards-based grade cards can help predict success for students. Hardegree (2012) found in her study that standards-based grade cards provided accurate predictive information about how a student would perform on a high-stakes standardized assessment. This study helps to build the case for standards-based grade cards since other studies indicate traditional grades do not accurately reflect how students will perform (Brennan, Kim, Went-Gross, & Sipperstein (2001); Hardegree, 2012). However, Buttrey (2014) found the opposite to be true. In her study, she found that traditional grades have a slightly stronger correlation to standardized assessments than standards-based grades. Lee's (2013) study was unique because it targeted a system that was giving both styles of grades, traditional letter grades and standards-based grades. He also found that letter grades had a slightly stronger correlation to a standardized assessment, but also found that standards-based math scores provided a

significant correlation as well. Upon reviewing all this conflicting information, it seems there is no consistency to the research. Interestingly, one major difference between all these studies was their scope. Each study looked at different organizations, documents, and implementations. Craig's (2011) study included an entire state's education system with varying quality grade cards. Hardegree's (2012) and Lee's (2013) study focused on a specific school system with similar grade cards, training, and implementation. Buttrey (2014) used scores from a rural Kentucky school district. Perhaps the difference is actually in the implementation and use of standards-based grade cards that makes a difference. That implementation and use is the focus of this study.

Lee's (2013) study also addressed the perceptions of teachers and administrators and how they believed grades correlated to performance on standardized assessments. He found both groups felt that external factors played a large part in determining grades as well as their correlation to standards. Administrators felt the largest external factor was teacher experience and knowledge about assessments and standards. Teachers had many external factors, such as test validity and parent influence. Interestingly, teachers expressed a "lack of confidence that their peers were using consistent strategies from classroom to classroom." As discussed earlier, Higher Elementary teachers expressed a deep desire in the transition to build more consistency between classrooms.

The literature surrounding standards-based grading suggests the grading mechanism alone is not a catalyst for changing student achievement, but rather a catalyst that can cause ripples into instruction, assessment, and parent involvement. So, Craig's (2011) study speaks strongly to the fact that standards-based grading alone may not make lasting change. However, claims by other authors (Cox, 2011; Erickson, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Reeves, 2011; Scriffiny,

2008) indicate standards-based grading impacts other areas of the system and creates a strong case for continuing the dive into standards-based grading. Craig's (2011) study did indicate a need for further investigation into standards-based grading. For this study, it becomes increasingly important to look at grading as a potentially high-level strategy that can be a catalyst for improving the system as a whole. If standards-based grading can be used as a catalyst for change in an entire system, correct implementation becomes exceedingly important. It is this correct and impactful implementation that this study seeks to ensure.

Why the Need for Change?

During my first year as principal at this school, I had a few teachers, in passing, mention the grading system really was not working well. I began to watch carefully and listen to discussions on grading. Many of these concerns are the very concerns reflected by current authors on the subject, especially Rick Wormeli's work. Some of those conversations topics included:

- At a grade level team meeting, discussions revolved around the new reading series, which included more complex text and phonics skills. Teachers discussed ways they were offsetting low student grades and even which assignments they were putting in the grade book. This conversation leads to a deeper question about how that affects students' motivation. Kohn (2011) referenced his earlier research, which found that grades have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation and cause students to choose easier tasks. They have a tendency to avoid risk taking and strive more for success than learning. He even found that grades "reduced the quality of thinking" (Kohn, 2011, p. 30).
- When looking at individual student reading scores on a nationwide assessment, teachers struggled to understand the basis for scores compared to classroom grades. An example

of a comment might be, “Well, that score can’t be right, he’s making an A in reading.”

Other issues like effort and turning in work distorted the grades. Wormeli (2014) speaks directly to the importance of separating the content from all the other things that muddy the waters, like clean notebooks and signed permission forms. Scriffiny (2008) discusses distorted grades and noted that some students were learning, but had missing assignments, and therefore, low grades. Other students “actually learned very little but were good at ‘playing school’” (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 71). These students earned good grades, but then did not have the prerequisite knowledge to perform in higher-level classes (Scriffiny, 2008). At times, our current grading system puts a higher value on “compliance and working than learning” (Vatterott, 2015, p. 7).

- Concerns regarding grading of special education students were expressed. Their grades were in no way a reflection of their learning, but instead were a reflection of the amount of support they were provided. The support was intended to provide accommodations and modifications that gave students hope for success and provide instruction at a level they could find that success. Wormeli (2010) says, “without hope, we have a bigger problem than a grading system.” Even high schools working on shifting their grading practices note the importance of hope, noting the effect of hope on both the teacher and student. “There’s hope for the student, but it’s also hope for the teacher because when you have too many students who get an F, who are on the bottom, it’s pretty hard to motivate” (Cox, 2011, p. 76). However, just changing letter grades may not be the best way to provide that hope. We must find a way to provide hope without simply changing the grades of special needs students, looking specifically at high expectations for those students as well. Jung and Guskey (2007) claim “adapted grades can lead such students

to believe that their grades are not the result of what they do but who they are” (p. 49).

Scriffiny (2008) also spoke to the use of standards-based grading with special needs students. If they need to demonstrate mastery in different ways, this can easily be accommodated without major changes in the grade book. In the past, schools have had a large emphasis on the traditional bell curve indicating that classrooms should have some students that exceed at higher rates and some that do not succeed at all. However, Guskey (2011) identifies the bell curve as being the normal, random occurring event. Vatterott (2015) reminds educators that teachers intervene in the normal occurring event. They teach and change the outlook for students! Therefore, if we still have students failing at the end and our grades still reflect a traditional bell curve, teachers have not intervened at the appropriate levels (Guskey, 2011).

- Some teachers raised concerns regarding consistency in grading practices in different classrooms throughout the grade level.
- We had discussions regarding corrections and how they should count toward a grade. This concern directly related to Rick Wormeli’s (2010) statement that simply “documenting deficiencies isn’t teaching” and those corrections shouldn’t only “count,” but should be encouraged!

All of these examples involved teachers doing their best to be fair and equitable in grading using an unfair system. The teachers truly wanted to do what was right for students, but they were working within a system that continually muddied the waters.

Throughout the summer, I reflected on my experiences in grading as a teacher. In previous districts, I graded in both a traditional letter grade format and on a standards-based grading system. Kohn (2011) claims that grading and assessment is really about finding out

what students can do and sharing that information. When reflecting on the standards-based grading system used in the past, I found that these grade cards allowed students and parents to focus more on learning, instead of just a letter grade. This allowed me to better share what Kohn claims is important information about what students could do and where extra work was needed. There were fewer questions about extra credit and passing, with more questions about how they could improve. In addition, standards-based grading allowed me to separate learning from behavior and work habits, which became major talking points with parents. Sometimes I talked with parents about a reading letter grade of B and told them they were reading just fine, but needed to slow down and put more effort into an assignment. However, the parent only heard the part about reading just fine or more effort, but rarely both. Jung and Guskey (2007) state, “Families need to know their children’s strengths and deficiencies, and interventions that can be undertaken at home to promote success” (p. 48). Standards-based grade cards listed strengths and deficiencies separately so they could be discussed separately. However, while the time commitment was not necessarily more, it was definitely different for teachers. My reflections agreed with Scriffiny (2008) that the “load of meaningless paperwork was greatly reduced” (p. 72). Grading individual assignments at night took less time because the focus was on determining if a student needed more practice instead of grading each problem completely to determine a percentage. Teachers could even make assignments shorter without worrying that one simple mistake would hurt the child’s grade. The trade off was that more time was involved in re-teaching, assessing, and completing the grade card by hand. The impact on instruction is one of the largest benefits of standards-based grading (Scriffiny, 2008; Erickson, 2011; Cox, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Reeves, 2011). I also knew just how important collaboration was in the

process, which required teacher commitment to the process, so I waited to see if the conversation about standards-based grading would continue.

Before the school year began, two more teachers stopped by my office to discuss this very topic. I put it on our agenda for the first faculty meeting of the year. We talked initially about what we really wanted from grade cards. We found that while we all wanted consistency and fairness, we knew we could not spend hours on grading if we truly wanted to teach. This could be achieved through clarifying our purpose for grading, creating quality performance standards, and clarifying our policies and procedures (O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011). We also wanted parents to understand the grades and how they related to specific learning and work habit skills.

Work habits and social skills became an important topic. At the elementary level, these skills were very important to share with parents. Teachers came to a consensus to move forward with creating standards-based grade cards, but we wanted to do it “right.” This “right” had to include identifying what constituted mastery, addressing exceptional learners, and parent communication. Staff identified a timeline that included a year of planning, communicating, and creating, a year of piloting and revising, and finally implementation. This project will focus on the year of piloting and revising in order to have a successful full implementation.

Teachers at Higher Elementary commented repeatedly on the need for change. At a staff meeting early in the fall of 2014, teachers identified several current states of affairs that did not meet our goals for reporting student learning:

1. Parents did not adequately understand the current performance levels of students.

Instead, the concern focused on the letter grade being attained. If a student made a grade

lower than the parent desired, questions were asked about extra credit or what the student could do to “raise the grade.”

2. Students with special circumstances, such as an Individualized Education Plan, received grades based upon the extra assistance they received. Most of the time, these students received higher grades than others in the classroom performing at similar levels of effort and achievement due to the extra assistance they received. Randall and Engelhard (2010) found this to be true as well in their study, stating, “It appears that teachers reward students with low ability tremendously when they both work hard and behave in class.” This could, at times, mislead parents who believed their child was receiving a particular grade working at grade level when that grade came with a great deal of assistance. Jung and Guskey (2007) maintain, “One of the most important functions of report cards and grades is to give families information on their children’s progress in school” (p. 48). Jung and Guskey’s research on the effects of grading on exceptional students speaks directly to this concern and is discussed in detail later in this chapter.
3. The assignments included in a grade, such as corrections, late work, work completed as a class or group, and even test grades, were not consistent across classrooms. Students in different classes could receive very different grades, even with similar abilities and effort. Cox (2011) found this to be the case in the classrooms she studied. Students could make very different grades with the same level of skill and knowledge but simply different teachers.

Upon further discussion, the teachers identified several areas that we desired to make reality:

1. Our grade card communicates clearly to parents how their child performed and where the child should perform at a given point in time.

2. Teachers grade consistently, with a common understanding of the learning that demonstrates mastery on a given task. Cherniss (2008) noted this was an area teachers had to work closely on, even with standards-based grading to ensure consistency in scoring students.

Guskey and Bailey (2010) identify three reasons for changing report cards and not waiting to do so. First, the traditional letter grade report cards we have now do not work. They do not accomplish the necessary goals of reporting and grading students. Second, after multiple reforms in education, grading remains the same. Finally, like Reeves (2011), they identify grading as an area that can impact many other areas of teaching. The discussions prompted by the creation of reporting forms leads to better standards, instructional strategies, and assessments. Nearly every author seems to agree on this vital area. (Cox, 2011; Erickson, 2011; Kohn, 2011; Reeves, 2011; Scriffiny, 2008, Vatterott, 2015.) Grading reform reaches out into so many other areas of teaching and learning that it can become the catalyst for wide-reaching reform. Scriffiny (2008) noted that reforming the way teachers report student grades changed the interventions, assessments, and standards utilized in the room. Vatterott (2015) states that “the reform of one educational practice—grading—has the potential to drive related changes in other practices,” namely curriculum, instruction, and assessment (p. 5). Cherniss (2008) found in his study that standards based grading impacted how teachers formally and formatively assessed students. Teachers began looking at how students performed on individual standards instead of looking at overall performance. One challenge may be helping teachers understand that how they grade is part of how they teach. The teachers in Cherniss (2008) linked the increase in student achievement scores to instruction. One teacher from the Cherniss study commented that she didn’t necessarily think the report card made a difference in scores, but rather the way they

taught. In Buttrey's (2014) study, the teachers she interviewed reported standards-based grade cards, "helped them to focus on what needed to be taught in the classroom" (p. 80). Scriffiny (2008) also notes standards-based grading helps teachers focus their instruction on the areas students need to improve.

Other authors call the current system "grade fog" (Deddeh, Maine, & Fulkerson, 2010, p. 54) or "hodgepodge grading" (Cross & Frary, 1999, p. 53). They list a variety of items that are included in grades, other than learning, such as work habits and behavior. Cowell and Hooper (2014) state that this is due to using a grading system whose purpose is not well defined. The purpose of letter-based grade cards can be all those things found in the fog: behavior, compliance, academic achievement, punishment, motivation, and ranking students. Randall and Engelhard (2010) found that teachers do indeed include multiple items in their grading, concluding, "On average, students with both high effort and excellent behavior all receive a grade 'boost' regardless of ability or achievement level." Cross and Frary (1999) claim that both students and teachers can, at times, prefer this method of grading because "hodgepodge grading may serve to protect not only students, but also teachers, from negative professional or social consequences" (p. 54). In contrast, Higher Elementary teachers desired a clearer method of grading, and "with standards-based grading, grades are based solely on summative assessments designed to measure content mastery" (Deddeh et al., 2010, p. 54).

Change Theory

Moving to a standards-based reporting system is a major change initiative for all stakeholders. However, Guskey (2011) assures leaders that those "who have the courage to challenge the traditional approach and the conviction to press for thoughtful, positive reforms are likely to see remarkable results" (p. 21). I once had a fellow educator tell me, in the middle of a

huge change initiative, that change always involves loss. It's important to identify and acknowledge the loss so we can move on to new things. Along with a loss, change always brings risk (Reeves, 2011). However, "One thing is certain: The perpetuation of current practices will guarantee the perpetuation of current results" (Reeves, 2011, p. 78). Higher Elementary intends to change the current practice to a practice more aligned to student learning. This will definitely involve risk and loss, but could be the turning point toward a more preferable system. While acknowledging the loss involved with change, leaders must also work to focus on the positive replacement for that loss. "To succeed in tearing down old traditions, you must have new traditions to take their place" (Guskey, 2011, p. 21).

Both Reeves (2011) and Brookhart (2014) indicate the need to begin the change process with conversations about what's important. Reeves (2011) cites the need to discuss principles, or those pieces that a school believes about grading practices. Brookhart (2014) talks about the need to focus on the main issue: What meaning do grades have and to whom are we attempting to give that message? They both also discuss the need to stay the course and not get wrapped up in secondary issues or specific policy concerns early in the conversation with stakeholders.

Kotter and Rathgeber (2005) introduce Kotter's eight steps for change in the form of a fable about penguins. Throughout this light-hearted story, each step is discussed and demonstrated. The implementation of new grading practices constitutes a huge change initiative. As we work through the process, I intend to lean heavily on Kotter's steps for creating lasting change in the following manners:

1. Create a Sense of Urgency. – After reaching consensus on the desire to move forward with the process, the next step was a timeline. I shared this timeline with staff, parents, and our board of education. This definitely creates a sense of urgency. We had a finite

amount of time to create an initial grade card. This means we cannot put off the difficult tasks of selecting standards and communicating with parents.

2. Pull Together the Guiding Team – Our staff is fairly small. We have four teachers in two grade levels. After some soul searching, it was decided that our grade level teachers, special education teacher, TITLE teacher, and PE teacher would work together to guide the process.
3. Develop the Change Vision and Strategy – After a timeline, our teachers’ next project was to develop the purpose and goals for the grade card. Our purpose centers on informing parents of their child’s current levels of performance and progress toward goals. During an early training session, we worked through a text by Guskey and Bailey (2010) entitled *Developing Standards-Based Report Cards*. This text laid out a direction for working through the process.
4. Communicate for Understanding and Buy In – In the initial months of development, teachers communicated extensively on the subject. However, we also communicated with our site council which is comprised of teachers and parent, and we also communicated at the very beginning with our district administrator and board of education.
5. Empower Others to Act – This step seemed not to apply at first. However, after further thoughts, it became obvious that it would be vital. Teachers have a true desire to make this work and do it right! However, sometimes the desire for perfection leads to an inability to act. During this step, we must empower teachers to make decisions, try new things, and act on their best knowledge.

6. Produce Short-term Wins – This step will be replayed over and over. During the creation stage, this step consists of providing closure and recognizing progress. The entire process can be overwhelming, so chunking the work and recognizing successfully finishing smaller chunks will keep teachers motivated and on-task. Also, the first year of piloting and utilizing the created grade card brings about unknown challenges, so celebrating the successes becomes increasingly important.
7. Don't Let Up – Our grading practices need to be a continuing area of conversation throughout grade level meetings now and in the future. I also hope the use of a different grading model brings about a different conversations related to project-based learning and deeper collaboration between teachers. The ultimate goal is to strengthen the focus for all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administration, and students, on learning.

This may be the largest area of the study; how has Higher Elementary navigated the change process for implementing standards-based grading. One particular area of concern is the communication strategies used to build support with teachers and, especially, families. Reeves (2011) speaks largely to this when he discusses this in his article “Taking the Grading Conversation Public.” It is important to approach conversations with parents and teachers in a strategic way. Reeves identifies a need to discuss the why before the how, as well as what will remain the same and then what will be changing. Another area the study will address is the ability of teachers to devise new methods of reporting and collecting data without a fear of failure and maintain a collegial atmosphere. “Our first presumption should be that all involved in the discussion love kids and care about their future” (Reeves, 2011). By maintaining this assumption, we can better see criticisms and suggestions as a push toward becoming better instead of a negative attack. One study provides some hope for implementation. Swan, Guskey,

& Jung (2014) found in their study that when given both a traditional grade card and standard-based grade card, parents “overwhelmingly preferred the standards-based form” (p. 289).

Exceptional Learners

When teachers at the school began the early stages of discussion for changing the grading system, our special education teacher’s first response was, “What about my kids?” He continued to discuss the fact that in a standards-based approach where teachers reported what students knew and could do, some of his students would always receive low marks because they weren’t even working on grade level standards. For exceptional students, “passing” becomes very important when looking at policy relating to grades. In *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982), the courts ruled that an IEP must “enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade.” While Dean (2014) found there to be no significant differences in retention rates of students graded using traditional grading methods and standards-based grading, standards-based grading adds confusion to the idea of “passing marks.” It quickly became obvious this would be an area that needed great thought and consideration in order to maintain compliance with current legislation and also share a student’s actual progress toward standards.

As we continued discussing the grading of special education students, it became obvious that our current issue was very different to that being reported in available literature (Personal Communication). That literature generally concludes that students with disabilities have lower reported scores than their peers (Munk & Bursuck, 2001, p. 211). However, we found that due to the amount of support, adaptations, and modifications we provided, these students actually scored, on average, higher than their peers who were perceived by teachers to be in the average range for their classrooms. We also discussed the misconceptions by parents that these students were actually performing on grade level for different tasks, even when noted on the grade card

that modifications were made. We identified a need to be able to accurately report a special education student's current levels of performance.

One important piece of information came from Jung and Guskey's (2011) work regarding the different types of standards that grades currently contain. Currently, teachers utilize one letter grade to discuss product, process, and progress standards for all students. Product standards are those standards that show what students know and can do. An example of a product standard might be, "The student solves two-digit addition problems." Process standards are those standards that discuss behavior, such as turning in homework or working well with others. Finally, progress standards focus on the growth students are making (Jung & Guskey, 2011). Currently, teachers utilize a variety of ways to offset low product scores for exceptional students with progress and process objectives that help to raise students' grades to an acceptable level (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005). While this makes their letter grades look much better, it does not give a true picture of the current performance level of students, which is the major goal of the grade card.

Jung and Guskey (2011) conclude this grade manipulation does not fit within the confines of a standards-based report card where, "Questions about academic skills cannot be answered with indicators of behavior" (Jung & Guskey, 2011, p. 34). The authors also refer to a study by Ring and Reetz (2000) in order to state that adaptations to grades "actually lead to a decrease in motivation" (as cited in Jung & Guskey, 2011, p. 34). However, when analyzing Ring and Reetz's (2000) study in its entirety, the study included only middle school students. There are differences in the way middle school and grade school students view themselves and schools, so this study does not speak to the results of students at the elementary level. Additional

research will need to be completed in order to determine if this conclusion holds true across multiple ages of students.

It became conclusive that there would need to be consideration given to exceptional learners in the new system. The questions then were who, what, and how? The most important information for deciding these questions lied in information from Jung and Guskey's (2011) article and their distinct separation between an accommodation and a modification.

“Accommodations are changes that provide access; they level the playing field,” while, “Modifications, on the other hand, change the game” (Jung & Guskey, 2011, p. 34). Within our system, I think of changes like reducing assignments and reading aloud the material as accommodations. Students utilizing these changes are still working on the same material as the rest of their peers, just in different ways. However, a select number of students leave the room during math or reading to work on lower-level material. For example, a second grade student could work on letter names, letter sounds, and sight words during that time. That is a modification to the material. This student is not working on material at the same level and rigor as the peers.

Jung and Guskey's (2011) five-step model for determining the appropriate form of grade card for exceptional children will be referred to during the implementation of the initiative for students needing accommodations or modifications to grade level curriculum. This is a practical model schools utilize in determining the appropriate form of grade card for exceptional students. Schools able to answer each question in the flow chart can formulate individual grade cards in a fair manner.

1. Can the student obtain the learning objective without any changes? If so, the objective stays the same for that student. If not, you continue down the flow chart.

2. Can the student obtain the learning objective with ONLY adaptations? This means the material stays at the same level of rigor, but changes are made that allow students to access the material. If yes, the objective stays the same for that student.

Accommodations are not usually listed on the grade card, but in our case, would be listed on the student's individual plan. If more than accommodations are necessary, continue down the flow chart and implement steps three through five.
3. What is the highest objective the student could "reasonably achieve during the current academic year?" (Jung & Guskey, 2011, p. 34). This becomes the new objective listed on the grade card for that student. At our school, we will utilize IEP goals from the student's current plan as suggested by Jung and Guskey. This becomes a modified grade card. This raises the importance of IEP goals and their rigor.
4. The student is then graded on the new objective determined by the team.
5. Educators must somehow identify the grade as a modified grade. The authors give several suggestions. In our case, we will most likely identify the grade card as being a modified grade card and then note each objective that is actually a modification with some sort of comment or symbol. This section made specific notes about the policy of adding modification notations to the grade card. Jung and Guskey state that as long as the modifications are made to any student who needs it, making those notations are legal. They insist that, "Notations make clear the necessary distinction between students who earned passing grades on the basis of grade-level standards and those whose performances were assessed against different standards" (Jung & Guskey, 2011, p. 36). This solves a major dilemma for our teachers regarding

providing encouraging grades for struggling learners while maintaining the integrity of the grading system.

We also had to consider the legality of modifying grade cards for individual students. This becomes an important point when working with special education students' grade cards. Grade cards eventually become part of a child's cumulative folder. We do not include information in a cumulative folder that might identify a child as receiving special education. Therefore, modifications must be available to students other than special education students. After consideration, it made sense that other students might have need of a modified grade card as well. For example, a student with a 504 plan due to a physical disability will probably need the physical education standards modified. An English Language Learner might need language arts standards modified while learning the language. In rare cases, a student with a Student Improvement Plan might be so severely delayed that a modified grade card would be necessary. Therefore, modified grade cards would be available to any student with a plan in place agreed upon by the educational team and parents. This model meets our local school board policies for grading practices which state: "The evaluation of a student's progress should be done on a fair and equitable basis," and "each student's ability and effort should be key factors in determining progress ratings" (Columbus Unified School District 493, 2014, student section, p. 11). This new model actually allows us to better meet district policy for our exceptional learners, which we now identify, in agreement with Jung and Guskey (2011), as students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and "any other student who, for reasons known or unknown, fall significantly behind their peers in mastering essential skills" (p. 34).

The impact of standards-based grading on exceptional learners must be a part of the study. As the literature and teachers at Higher Elementary discuss, the need is great for a method

of determining appropriate reporting mechanisms for exceptional learners that identifies strengths and weaknesses with accuracy. It is important this mechanism allow for the variety of curriculum accessed by exceptional learners.

Implementing the Change

The core of this study lies in implementation. Cherniss (2008) completed a study on implementing standards-based report cards in an elementary school. His study topic and research questions were similar to this study. However, he was an outsider to the school and was studying implementation after three years of using a new grade card. His research participants were limited to teachers and the administrator.

One major theme Cherniss (2008) found during his study was the difficulty teachers had communicating individual student performance to parents. They identified two language barriers with parents. In the studied school, a large portion of parents spoke another language, mostly Spanish. They combated this with a Spanish grade card, but this is not currently a concern in the district for this study. However, teachers also noted a language barrier in understanding educationese. Educationese can be defined as that specific language spoken by educators that tends to include technical terms, acronyms, and terminology of educators. The teachers specified further that it was difficult for them to understand the standards at times, so explaining them to parents was even more difficult. Teachers did, however, note that “the standards based report card allows for more rich dialogue with parents in communicating student performance” (p. 63). Parent understanding was an area of heightened concern for teachers at Higher Elementary when creating the grade card. Specific research and evaluation questions for the current study were designed to address parent understanding of the grade card. In Cherniss’s (2008) study, parents were noted by sixty percent of teachers as the largest challenge in implementing the standards

based report cards. Adrian's (2012) study also noted teacher concerns in educating parents. The concerns centered heavily on ensuring understanding for both parents and students so they could "participate as partners in the process" (p. 51).

Cherniss (2008) found that teachers did not necessarily think the standards based report cards helped them become more aware of the standards. Quotes shared by Cherniss (2008) from the study made it obvious that standards implementation and training was going on concurrently with implementing standards based grading. Like all schools, Higher Elementary is working on more than one initiative. Therefore, concurrent initiatives could impact the responses of teachers, as it appears happened during Cherniss's (2008) study.

A Higher Elementary teacher noted student motivation as a concern moving into standards based grading. Interestingly, Cherniss (2008) also noted this concern post-implementation. While teachers indicated that students better understood the standards they were being asked to know, they felt the new grade card was less motivating to students. Cherniss stated, "This sense of urgency associated with receiving an 'F' is an element which many teachers struggle to emulate by assigning scores of '1' and '2'" (p. 62). Adrian (2012) also indicated a need for professional development to motivate students in the new grading model, specifically in the areas of late work and homework. Higher Elementary teachers discussed the need to help change parent conversations with students from the letter grade parents wanted to see to a more specific conversation about areas to improve. However, as Cherniss (2008) noted, "Truly, the familiarity with letter grades may be so embedded in our social fabric that for many people it cannot be undone" (p. 73).

Adrian's (2012) found the tools that teachers use to be an important component of a successful implementation, namely the grade book. Teachers noted the need for professional

development to accompany the new grade book and managing their time. Adrian made several recommendations for professional development, including training in the tools, time management, determining student scores, and motivation for students. Both the tools and accompanying professional development needs are areas of interest for the current study at Higher Elementary.

Mindset and Mental Health

Mindset is the new buzzword in education and psychology circles. Haimovitz and Dweck (2016) speak about different types of mindsets, identifying intelligence mind-sets as “their beliefs about whether intelligence is fixed or malleable” (p. 859). While it is clear that “parents are key to children’s motivation and success in school,” (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016, p. 859) “no clear link has been found between parents’ intelligence mind-sets and their children’s” (p. 860). However, the same is not true when looking at the relationship between a parents’ failure mindset and a child’s failure or intelligence mindset. Haimovitz & Dweck (2016) found over the course of four different studies that if a parent viewed failure as debilitating it affected how they parented and also their child’s intelligence mind-set. It even showed that children are able to accurately perceive their parents’ failure mindset. This plays an important role in how we frame areas of weakness or lack of mastery on a report card with parents.

Intelligence mind-set has been used interchangeably with growth mindset. Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck (2016) identify growth mindset as “the believe that intelligence is not fixed and can be developed” (p. 8664). Their study found that while “family income is a strong predictor of achievement,” growth mindset was also a strong predictor across all socioeconomic groups (p. 8664). In fact, their study found that, while less likely to have a growth mindset, students from lower socioeconomic groups could buffer themselves against the negative impact

of their socioeconomic class. Specifically, “students in the lowest 10th percentile of family income who exhibited a growth mindset showed academic performance as high as that of fixed mindset students from the 80th income percentile” (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016, p. 8664).

While growth mindset and intelligence mindset are, at times, used interchangeably, Dweck (2006) provides a much broader definition, “growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (p. 7). This expands past just intelligence into areas of behavior and mental well-being. Mental health needs in schools continue to be a major concern for teachers and leaders. An estimated one in five children will experience a mental health illness in a given year. (CDC, 2013.) In Kansas, 12.4% of children between the ages of 6-11 and 16.6% of children between the ages of 12-17 have one or more emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a negative impact on academics (TASN, 2016; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, Kincaid, 2016). ACEs are defined as everything from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse to mental illness in the household. It includes neglect, divorce, domestic violence, or a criminal member of the household (Wolpow et al., 2016). According to the TASN’s School Mental Health Resource (2016) in Kansas, “more than half (54.5%) of Kansas adults have experienced at least one ACE when growing up. One in five Kansans have experienced 3 or more ACEs as a child/adolescent” (p. 1). For students experiencing these before or during their school years, “students dealing with ACEs are 2 ½ times more likely to fail a grade; score lower on standardized achievement test scores; have more receptive or expressive language difficulties; are suspended or expelled more often; and, are designated to special education more frequently” (TASN, 2016, p. 1). In addition, “Acquisition of academics (e.g., reading, writing, and math) requires attention, organization, comprehension, memory engagement in learning, and trust. Traumatic stress from

adverse childhood experiences can undermine the ability of children to form relationships, regulate their emotions, and learn the cognitive skills necessary to succeed academically” (Wolpow et al., 2016, p. 12).

One study conducted found that teachers identified and intervened with students who experienced extreme trauma and were able to improve their scores. However, students with moderate trauma flat-lined during the first two years following the trauma and then actually scores dropped (Duplechain, Reigner & Packard, 2008). When referencing the Duplechain et al. (2008) study, Wolpow et al. (2016) stated”

The researchers concluded that educators were adept at recognizing and assisting students struggling with extreme trauma. The researchers reported that ‘the moderate exposure group appears to be most at risk’ because they didn’t exhibit as many school-related concerns at first. It appears that with some help from their families and communities they adapted at first, but over time their reading scores declined significantly.” (p. 6)

Literature Review Conclusion

Utilizing the research and personal knowledge, Higher Elementary moved from a system of grading based upon percentages and letter grades to a system that identifies student learning and effort in ways parents can understand. This process impacted multiple areas of teaching and learning. It is the hope of teachers and administrators in the school that a new model of grading, such as standards-based reporting, will move the parents, educators, and students to a heightened focus on learning.

Conceptual Framework

A large portion of the information surrounding this evaluation is situated within personal and professional observations. However, it is through these observations that current theory presents itself as important to the topic. Early observations by teachers identified a state of affairs not consistent with the desired state. This led to an initial discussion regarding standards-

based grading. The literature indicated standards-based grading could be a high-leverage strategy that could move the system forward toward the desired state (Reeves, 2011; Scriffiny, 2008). Through that literature, it became obvious this was not an isolated area of study, but part of a large system that would need to be addressed as such. The items that make this high-leverage, such as its impact on instruction and assessment and policy, were part of that larger system. This made systems-based thinking an important component of the literature.

The professional discussions surrounding exceptional learners led to deeper research on how standards-based grading affects those students. This again was part of the larger system of learning and related back to systems-based thinking. Whenever one goes about looking at how we educate, grade, or otherwise change the learning process for an exceptional student, policy and law play a major role in those decisions.

The personal and professional connections by those implementing standards-based grading led the group to believe this could be a difficult change for parents and teachers due to the vast change in thinking. Therefore, change theory became a major component of how the school implements a successful standards-based grading model.

The figure below shows the ideas and structures that work together throughout this study to build a conceptual framework used to find literature regarding the implementation of standards-based grading.

Chapter Summary

This chapter synthesized the research available to Higher Elementary as they began the process of moving from an undesirable state to a more desirable state of grading. However, it is also the literature used to determine if the implementation is successful as shown through a study of the perceptions of teachers and parents. The following chapter will discuss the methods, participants, and procedures that will be used through this study. It will more specifically discuss the type, goal, and focus of the study completed during the pilot year of standards-based grading. Chapter four will discuss the results of the study, including the survey, focus group, and interviews. Finally, chapter five will discuss conclusions drawn from the study, as well as recommendations and limitations of the study.

Chapter 3

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. This study investigated the perceptions of parents and teachers during the pilot year of implementing standards-based grading in the second grade. This was a mixed methods approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. This study used an explanatory sequential model collecting first quantitative and qualitative data through the use of a survey and using the information gained to modify the semi-structured interview protocols for the qualitative portion of the study (Creswell, 2015). This study focused on four primary research questions:

1. **During the pilot year, how has the standards-based report card affected parent/teacher communication? How does the new report card impact parents' understanding of their child's performance?** These questions lie at the heart of the teachers' reasons for desiring a change to the current system. The most important goal identified by staff was parent understanding of the current levels of student performance. Therefore, these questions are of significant importance to the staff and administration.
2. **During the pilot year, how has standards-based grading affected teacher instruction and assessment in the classroom?** The literature suggests that the true power behind standards-based grading lies in its impact to other areas, specifically instruction and assessment (Reeves, 2011; Scriffiny, 2008). This question is intended

- to judge this very impact. If student learning is directly related to instruction, then the question becomes, how is standards-based grading impacting instruction?
3. **How could the processes, procedures, or tools be changed or modified to better serve the needs of parents and teachers?** This question relates strongly to the board of education's interest in accurately assessing students and ensuring grades accurately reflect the current performance of students. Teachers also identified a need to ensure consistent grading across all classrooms within the grade level. This will required deep discussion regarding assessment and instruction as well. Thus, this question speaks not only to the grading instrument, but also to the teachers' ability and tools needed to utilize the new grade card. Finally, this question addresses the vast differences in abilities amongst students and examines the necessary structures in place for accurately assessing all students' levels of learning, even those with significant delays. During this study, second grade alone was implementing the new grade card on a pilot basis. The goal behind the pilot was to identify and correct issues before fully implementing the following year. Therefore, this question is extremely important to teachers and administrators. However, it is also broad and led to a variety of areas for improvement. This question is truly continuous throughout implementation. Each year, or at least every few years, teachers must look carefully to see what changes could improve the current grade card.
 4. **What pieces of the training, professional development, or communication plan did parents and teachers find most helpful? What other communication tools or sessions, training, or professional development could be useful?** These questions should be an important aspect of every new change initiative for schools. It plays

solidly into the change procedures mentioned previously. The communication early in the process for parents builds capacity with families to help understand their child's progress and how to communicate questions and concerns with teachers. Professional development helps build buy-in, but more importantly, builds teacher knowledge, which then paves the way to success. When educators have the knowledge and skills to accurately complete a task, they become more confident and willing to attempt the next steps. Those next steps take educators deeper into the process of changing instruction and impacting student learning. These are the overarching goals of most changes in the education system, including the current change in student grades.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss not only the methodology used in this study, but also the rationale for determining such methodology. There is also discussion of the planned methods contrasted with the actual methods utilized in the study due to difficulties getting participants. The context of the study is described in detail. Both the participants of the study and the methods used in the study are also covered later in this chapter. Following the participants and methods is an explanation of the plan for analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data. This chapter concludes by discussing the trustworthiness of the study, as well as its limitations and delimitations.

Rationale

The design of this study was built around the idea of engaging many different aspects of the school system. It leaned heavily on the theoretical framework of systems thinking. Interview and survey questions speak to multiple areas of the system, including

instruction, assessment, communication with stakeholders, teacher tools and processes, and parent involvement with student learning.

Originally this study focused specifically on qualitative data as a means to gather information regarding the implementation of standards-based grading. Qualitative data was chosen because of its “prominent role in eliciting data and suggesting some patterns that may not have been observed in quantitative data alone” (Salaka, 2008, p. 2).

Participants can freely communicate about the topic and the researcher has the chance to hear varying perspectives. It also allows the researcher to dig deeply into the “why” and the “how.” These are especially important for formative studies focused on making lasting change. Quantitative data was added as a means of obtaining feedback from a larger number of participants and allowing all parents the opportunity to participate in the process and share their perspectives.

This study is built around practical application of the study and as such, leans on a pragmatic theoretical perspective. Grey (2004) suggests, “Pragmatists focus on whether a proposition...is capable of creating action” (p. 28). The entire goal of this study was to affect practice, not only for the school involved in the study, but also for any school implementing a standards-based grading model, specifically influencing change within the current educational society. The pragmatic theoretical perspective also affects the type of research being conducted. Grey further explains, “Pragmatism views the mixing of quantitative and qualitative data in a single study not only as legitimate, but in some cases necessary” (p. 29). This study follows the pragmatic view and utilizes a mixed methods approach to gather data.

Problem Setting/Context

Standards-based grading is the practice of reporting to parents specific standards that students need to master at a particular grade level. Great Schools (n.d.) define a standards-based report card as one that, “lists the most important skills students should learn in each subject at a particular grade level... Instead of letter grades, students receive marks that show how well they have mastered the skills” (p.1).

Purpose

The goal for standards-based grading implementation was primarily to share with parents a child’s current level of performance more accurately. However, this process also provides the opportunity for teachers to know and monitor specific skills students still need to master. A third goal for standards-based grading involved exceptional learners. These learners may not be working on grade level standards. This system of standards-based grading builds in a component that allows for more accurate reporting of their progress as well.

Logic Model

Below is a logic model for standards-based grading (see Figure 3.1). This logic model speaks of the inputs, processes, participants, outputs, and outcomes of the program. The logic model speaks to the three main stakeholder groups the program is intended to benefit: students, parents, and teachers. The processes and inputs address the importance of communication and training for parents and teachers. Students do not have a short-term goal. It is the an assumption of this evaluation that changing the way teachers and parents discuss student learning will have impacts upon students. Medium-term impacts for students involve the communication between student, teacher, and parent about the skills students need to work on for mastery and how they

can accomplish that task. There is a strong possibility this will happen naturally in some classrooms. However, it will need to be directly addressed in others. Parents and teachers need to have a strong understanding before they can visit with the student. Therefore, this has been listed as a medium-term impact in order to give time for teachers and parents to become familiar with the process.

There are several assumptions of the current logic model:

- Parents want to be involved in their child's education.
- Given parent-friendly reports, parents will read them.
- The initial and re-teaching instruction in the classroom is quality instruction provided by qualified instructors.
- The essential skills prepare students for the next level of instruction.

Some of these assumptions are for groups of stakeholders as a whole. For example, even with parent-friendly reports, some parents may not read them for other reasons, such as their current schedule or reading ability. However, the program is based around these assumptions for the groups of stakeholders involved in the process.

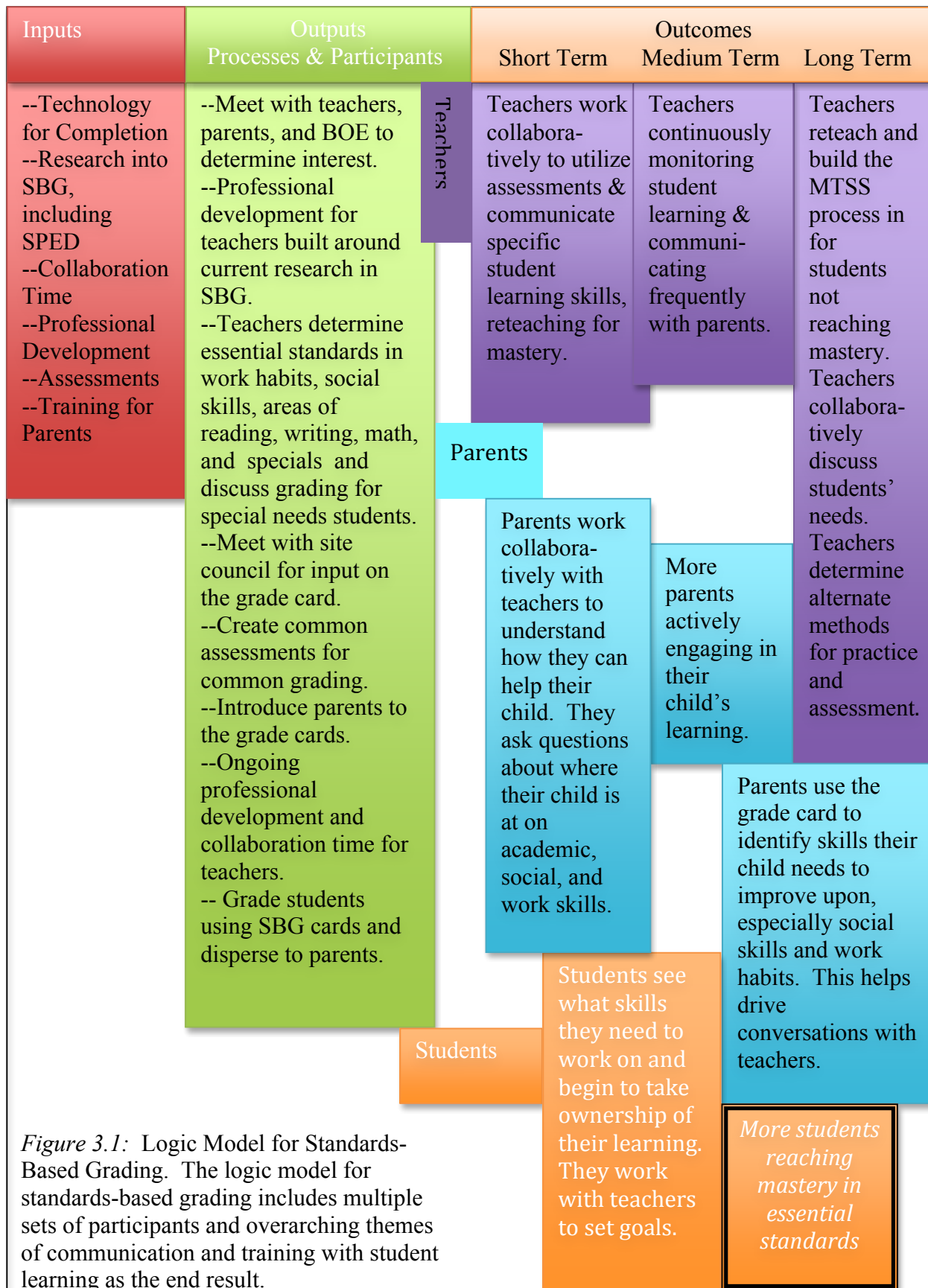


Figure 3.1: Logic Model for Standards-Based Grading. The logic model for standards-based grading includes multiple sets of participants and overarching themes of communication and training with student learning as the end result.

Stakeholders

The beneficiaries of this program should be extensive. The first, and most obvious, are families. One purpose of the program is to clearly communicate with parents. This makes families an extremely important beneficiary in this process. Helping teachers clearly define unmet objectives allows teachers to adjust instruction. Grade level teams also benefit from more closely aligned assessment and instruction. The program is overseen by the building administrator and is implemented by teachers. Parental introduction to the program will be a shared responsibility from administration and teachers. The financial support is negligible, but any required funds are provided through district funds.

Initial assumptions regarding challenges related to the multiple stakeholders included: a) Some parents will be opposed to the program as well as any evaluation that does not immediately indicate a return to the old, familiar way of a letter-based grading system; and b) Some teachers that have worked hard to create the grade card and assessments may be opposed to recommended changes that may be addressed in the evaluation.

Purpose of the Study

The first year of implementation was a pilot year. This provided leaders and educators the ability to make changes in a more positive and accepted manner. When implementing standards-based grading, this process allows a year of formative study and changes before full implementation in multiple grade levels the following year.

This study identified areas that could be improved within the standards-based grading system to allow a more effective approach to communicating student learning. It was completed during the pilot year of implementation at the second grade level. It focused on three areas:

communication, assessment/instruction, and technical issues. With this purpose in mind, the study pulled from a variety of approaches to reach its goal.

This study was focused on making decisions that create a better process for teachers, parents, and students to be informed of student's progress toward mastering grade level objectives. Traditionally, this process included the use of averaged percentages that give students a letter grade of A, B, C, and D. The new process included listing those items considered essential for students to master in order to be ready for the following year. Then, teachers report how well students have mastered that particular skill. Involved within this process are communication, assessment, technology, and instructional issues that must be in place for the process to work. This study sought to assist educators in making better decisions following a pilot year of the new process. Therefore, the primary approach will be a decision-oriented approach. Specifically, this study was designed to look specifically at how the program is being implemented. Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen (2011) suggest, "Once the program has begun, the important decisions concern how to modify its implementation" (p. 174). The CIPP (Context, Input, Product, Process) model suggested by Stufflebeam advocates a six-step model for decision-oriented evaluations that begins with "Focusing the Evaluation" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, p. 174).

While Stufflebeam suggests important questions in this first step, he does not address the need to deeply understand how the program is supposed to work (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Therefore, the study will also draw from a theory-based approach to understand the program and narrow the reach of the study to a manageable size. This grading system is part of a larger system that will interact and intertwine with this program. This is the idea of a systems thinking theory. One component of systems thinking is a narrowing of the scope to make the evaluation

manageable. This will be an important component for this program, as it has such a broad scope of impact for multiple areas of the system. When speaking about systems approaches,

Hummelbrummer (2011) states:

Contrary to what people often think, systems approaches are not ‘holistic’ in the sense that they aim to include everything...And the implications are often the opposite of holism: being concerned with what can be reasonably left out—but also deeply and openly aware of the consequences. (p. 400)

Therefore, any evaluation in such a vast system must have a means of setting boundaries.

Theory-based approaches can help provide those boundaries. Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) concludes, “The reality of delivering programs is complex...but that is the purpose of theories or models—to reduce the messiness...” (p. 167). Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) identifies theory-based approaches as a model that “helps the evaluator identify the most important elements or linkages to evaluate” (p.167).

To a lesser extent, but no less important, a mixture of qualities from objectives-oriented and participant-oriented approaches will also show up in the study. Prior to initiating the program, staff identified the objectives of the program as better parent communication and accuracy in reporting. One of the goals of this study was to determine if the current processes and procedures achieve those goals. The program participants, primarily parents and staff, were vital during the collection of data. They also assisted in the final process of interpreting findings. Primarily, staff and parents were vital in determining what specific changes could be made to address findings from the study.

Goals

This study is formative in nature. The general premise of the study is to determine what changes or modifications can be made to the standards-based grade card. As the initial year utilizes only second grade students and parents, the findings of this study will heavily impact the initial creation of the third grade report card for implementation the following year. At its initiation, this evaluation seeks to look at a variety of factors during implementation:

1. The grade card's structure, readability and ease of use.
2. The standards included on the grade card.
3. The communication with parents regarding the grade card.
4. The ability of the grade card to help parents understand what students know and can do.
5. The ability of teachers to appropriately determine student scores using assessments.
6. Necessary next steps to make the program more effective.

This study contributes to the organizational learning in several ways. As teachers are asked to think deeply about their practices, they have the opportunity to learn about what they do and why they do it. This potentially leads to deep learning for those teachers. Just learning how parents view the grading system and the communications from the school helps administrators and teachers become better at communicating and working with parents. Perhaps the deepest level of learning occurs when one must create solutions. This is definitely an activity in which the school will engage. Staff will listen to the findings and attempt to find solutions that will fill gaps and address concerns.

Context

The school involved in this study has approximately 150 students and 25 staff members. It is located in a rural community that contains both farming and a few large businesses. The district includes a central community with several outlying smaller communities. It has a large farming community and several hundred square miles. The district has about 1,000 students situated in four buildings. The buildings are divided into grades kindergarten and first, second and third, fourth through eighth, and a traditional ninth through twelfth grade high school.

Tradition is a large part of the community with celebrations stretching back decades and multi-generational family units living within the community. Approximately 70% of students qualify for free or reduced lunches. The building which houses Higher Elementary was originally built in 1938 and now houses all students in grades two and three for the district. While state assessment data has been nonexistent in the last few years due to implementation and piloting of a new assessment system, historically this school and district performs around the state average. The school recently implemented a version of Response to Intervention known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). This intervention is designed to assist students not meeting grade level targets in reading and math.

Historically, kindergarten students received a checklist grade card with specific skills listed and then checked when mastered. First grade students received a type of standards-based grade card that listed skills but were still based largely on a percentage score. Beginning in second grade, students received a letter grade for each subject based upon percentage scores or points. The method of scoring and determining what information was included within the grade rested primarily with the teacher. During the time that Higher Elementary School's second grade teachers worked on their new standards-based grade card, the first grade teachers simultaneously

revamped their grade card to reflect a truer standards-based grade card focused on mastery instead of an average of percentages.

Research Sample and Data Sources

The primary sampling strategy in this study was criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is a purposeful sampling based on preconceived criteria (Sandelowski, 2000). In this case, all parents who had second grade students at Higher Elementary were asked to participate in at least one method of the study. All second grade teachers utilized these report cards and were asked to participate in an individual interview. Perhaps one of the most valuable purposes of this sampling strategy for the school was the chance to involve various stakeholders in a process that will seek input from a variety of people. This process hoped to draw others into the education process, especially parents, who might not usually be involved in the school setting. The primary reason that criterion sampling was utilized in this study was to provide the opportunity for everyone to connect with the process of improving the school.

Parents were initially encouraged to be involved in the process through the school site council. The site council is a group of parents, community members, and staff members that serve as an advisory council to the principal. They discuss topics that might be of importance at any given time. For example, this group provides advice for increasing parent involvement or ways to involve students in the community. Two teachers serve on the committee and usually four parents or community members. This group is always open to any parents who wish to attend, so all Higher Elementary parents wishing to participate may do so. This group was asked to participate in a focus group in order to include perspectives from second grade parents currently utilizing standards-based report cards. All parents were invited to several opportunities to participate in a focus group. The first attended focus group had two participants. The

following three focus groups had five, three, and two respectively. The intent was to then select parents from the group to do two individual interviews collecting more specific information regarding the new grading system. The hope was to find information-rich cases that provided multiple perspectives. However, due to the small sizes in the focus group and the make-up of those groups, it was felt that participants shared openly during the groups and were able to provide answers to all the questions and no additional information would be gained through individual interviews. All second grade parents also received a survey to complete regarding standards-based grading methods. Surveys were given to seventy-two second grade parents.

All second grade teachers participated in individual interviews regarding the new grading system. Each of the four teachers had utilized the system for three quarters of the year prior to the interviews. Each second grade teacher brought a unique perspective and needed to be invited to participate in the process in order to get a full view of implementation.

Data Collection Methods

This study used an explanatory sequential model collecting first quantitative and qualitative data through the use of a survey and using the information gained to modify the semi-structured interview protocols for the qualitative portion of the study. The first type of data that was collected consisted of survey information. It was important for all families to feel involved in the process. Therefore, a survey was distributed to all parents who have children in the grade being piloted. The survey was given prior to parent focus groups and helped guide the questions asked during the semi-structured focus group interview. It was hoped that the focus group would help clarify responses from the survey needing more detailed responses. The goal of the survey was to gain insight from the piloting parents regarding suggestions for improvement and thoughts for moving forward. There were specific questions regarding the parents' ability to use

the information to discuss with students, teachers, and parents the current learning levels of the student. There were also specific questions regarding the understandability of the report card, as well as the communication for parents as they learn to use this style of grade card. Because of the implementation structure, no parent had letter style grade cards for their child and then moved to standards-based report cards. Therefore, a pre and post survey model was not possible in this situation. The survey involved a mixture of quantitative information in the form of multiple choice answers and qualitative information in the form of comments (Appendix C).

Next, data were collected via a focus group involving parents, as discussed briefly above (Appendix A). Initially, a site council meeting was held and widely publicized in April inviting parents to come be part of the focus group. Only two parents attended the focus group. Worried that timing was an issue, in May focus groups were offered both during the day and in the evening on multiple dates. However, none of these gained any participants for the study. Therefore, focus groups were extended into the fall semester of the 2016-17 year in order to gain more information. Three additional focus groups were held gaining a total of ten additional participants. The intent of using focus groups was to gain richer data through the use of multiple participants by allowing participants to make connections between their experiences and even see the similarities or differences between experiences (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This seemed to be the case when discussing issues with parents and teachers in the past. As one participant mentions items, others agree or disagree, giving multiple insights and perspectives. This process also helps participants remember items they might not have mentioned otherwise. These benefits held true during the focus group even with few participants. One of the largest concerns with this method of data collection involves the overpowering of the group by one participant. The goal is to get multiple perspectives. As the researcher, I intended to specifically ask questions of

different participants. Then, these focus groups could be followed up by individual interviews if any participant didn't get to share thoughts fully during the focus group. This may be one of the benefits of small focus groups. The parents in attendance got along well and answered each question asked. The focus group interview was a semi-structured interview. Individual, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with teachers (Appendix B).

Documents were also reviewed. Specifically, completed grade cards were viewed to determine the ability of teachers to accurately determine mastery, as well as judging the quality of the assessments used to determine mastery. The teachers' organizational methods were also considered. Documents from other districts were reviewed prior to implementation to compare and determine best practices currently being utilized in the field. These documents did not need to be identifiable by student. Therefore, any identifying information was removed for the purposes of the study. However, as the researcher is also the current leader of the building, it is possible these documents might also be discussed as a building staff, outside the scope of the study.

Data Analysis Methods

The intent of the quantitative portion of the survey was to analyze the data using statistical methods, namely frequency distributions for individual questions. Intentions were to use T-tests to find the relationship between informational session attendance and grade card knowledge and use. This relationship could then be used to help determine if there is a benefit to holding an informational session. In other words, do parents who attended the informational session feel more confident utilizing the grade card than those without any training? However, a lack of variance in the data made these tests obsolete and percentages were reported instead.

Qualitative data from this study was analyzed utilizing a primary method of provisional coding with secondary methods of in vivo coding and open coding. Figure 3.2 shows the provisional codes taken from the research questions and guiding questions for use in this study. These codes were then be organized into themes and these themes analyzed in order to draw conclusions and recommendations from the qualitative data.

<p>Thoughts from Parents</p> <p>CU Content Understandability</p> <p>CP Communication Plan</p>	<p>Thoughts from Parents AND Teachers</p> <p>P/T Communication between teachers and parents</p> <p>CL Connection to learning</p> <p>PT/S Communication with the student from parents or teachers</p> <p>PP Processes and procedures utilized in the grading system</p> <p>RC Report card structure and content</p>	<p>Thoughts from Teachers</p> <p>A Assessments</p> <p>I Instruction</p> <p>T Tools used in the process</p>
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Figure 3.2. Provisional Codes. The codes in the red area were used to code parent comments while the codes in blue were used to code teacher comments. The codes in the purple area were used to code both comments from teachers and parents.

Trustworthiness

The building leader with the goal of improving a current program selected this project. This brings a level of trustworthiness to the study simply by its intent. The only way to improve

the program is to gain valid information from a variety of sources. One concern was that participants would not be willing to share information freely since the researcher was the building principal. Sharing the purpose of the study and seeking out interviewees that demonstrated a willingness to share their thoughts combated this. This was also one of the reasons the current site council's involvement was sought. This group meets several times a year, and this was not the only subject on which they were asked to share their thoughts. In essence, a relationship had been built already with this group that allowed freely sharing thoughts and opinions. Previous to the meeting was the invitation to participate in the focus group, and it was an additional, separate portion of the site council meeting for that evening in which parents chose to participate.

As with any internal study, the researcher (being the building leader) brings a level of bias to the project. One large area where this is evident is the purpose of the study. This study was not be used to determine whether or not to keep the program. Standards-based grading will be staying in place. This study looked at ways standards-based grading could be changed or fixed to enhance the program. This was included in the questions and study. One way that credibility was ensured is the inclusion and openness of the study. The survey was given to all parents, giving all parents the ability to communicate and share their ideas. The teacher interviews included all the grade level teachers implementing the report card. The use of multiple stakeholder groups in the study also leads to credibility for the program. If only teachers were utilized as study participants, it would not be possible to convince parents it was a credible study.

As a formative study, the findings dissemination will be quick and frequent. Third grade teachers were working on creating their report card throughout this study. Therefore, as themes and concerns began to surface, changes were put into place immediately. If parents identified a

need for more information, it would not have been good practice to wait until the study concluded to provide that information. Therefore, the initial dissemination of findings were immediately communicated with parents or teachers so that concerns could be addressed quickly.

The official findings of the study were presented in a couple of ways. The first was, of course, to the educators in the building that were working with the new reporting system. They were the direct users of the information. It is this dissemination that is the most important for the actual use of the findings. However, parents are important stakeholders in this process. Changes were presented to parents at an informational session the following year. This provided two very important benefits to the study. First, it showed those parents that participated that we heard and listened to what they had to say. This builds positive relationships with these parents and all those they talk to about the school system. It also helps build positive communication for future initiatives. Second, it provided information to parents on the changes they can expect to see in the program. This study is largely centered on communication, so this was a very important component.

Limitations and Delimitations

Anytime a study is set within the context of an operating school, limitations and delimitations exist. This is even truer when the researcher is also the building leader. One limitation of the study was the need to not alienate members of the community. For example, one interesting piece of information is how those with varying levels of education view the report cards. However, after much thought, this was not included in the study. There was concern that this might lead people to believe their responses would be judged based upon their education levels and reduce the participation of families. Another external factor that impacted the study is the willingness of parents to participate. At times, we have difficulty getting families

to fill out surveys. Over fifty percent of parents returned the surveys, which is a high rate of return for the building being studied. However, focus group participation by parents greatly limited the qualitative data collected from parents. It is possible this participation was due to the timing of the events. It was hoped this session would be held at third quarter reporting time. However, the timeline of the study and IRB approval did not make that a possibility. Therefore, the session was moved back to mid-April when most of our little league ball teams had begun practice and parents weren't focused on report cards. May is also a busy month for families and it is possible families had already focused on summer. It is also possible parents did not see the value or importance in the study or providing feedback.

During this study, families and teachers had experienced, at most, three quarters of the year using the new reporting method. Richer data might have been obtained by waiting until the entire school year is over. As stated above, this was attempted with parents with no additional participation. Second grade teachers might have provided additional information after a full year of the process. However, third grade teachers implemented standards-based grading the following year. This put a very specific timeline on the project since the goal was to improve the implementation of the third grade report card. This project was also purposely limited in its scope. The questions were solely limited to how we can improve the program, not whether the program is successful.

Summary

Zig Zigler once said, "You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great." This sums up the goals and value of this study. The educators in the building worked to create a quality reporting mechanism that could more adequately inform parents of student's current levels of performance. However, even with parental input, extensive research, and

experienced teachers, this was still a pilot that needed changes and adjustments to best meet the goals and intent of the new grading system. The goal of this formative study was to identify areas for improvement. The methods, interviews, and data involved in the study sought to address that specific goal. The use of mixed methods and a variety of question topics pulls from the system and leans heavily on systems thinking as a way of improving not only a reporting mechanism, but the system as a whole. Even the research questions pull from the idea of looking at how standards-based grading affects multiple areas of the system, such as assessment, instruction, and parent involvement. The use of a mixed methods study also draws on the need to remain a positive leader within the system, involving all families in the process, while finding specific strategies that could be used to improve the process.

Chapter 4

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study were used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. For this study, both parents and teachers of current second grade students were involved in the data collection process. The intent was to conduct a study that would assist building leaders with the process of refining the second grade report card and successfully implementing a new report card in third grade as well.

Survey

All second grade parents were invited to participate in a survey sent home with their child. Seventy-two surveys were sent home with students. Forty-four surveys were returned giving a 61% return rate. Two surveys were removed from the study. One survey was obviously completed by the child. A parent whose child was not in her custody completed the second, and she had not seen any report card according to her statement on the survey. Five surveys were returned declining participation.

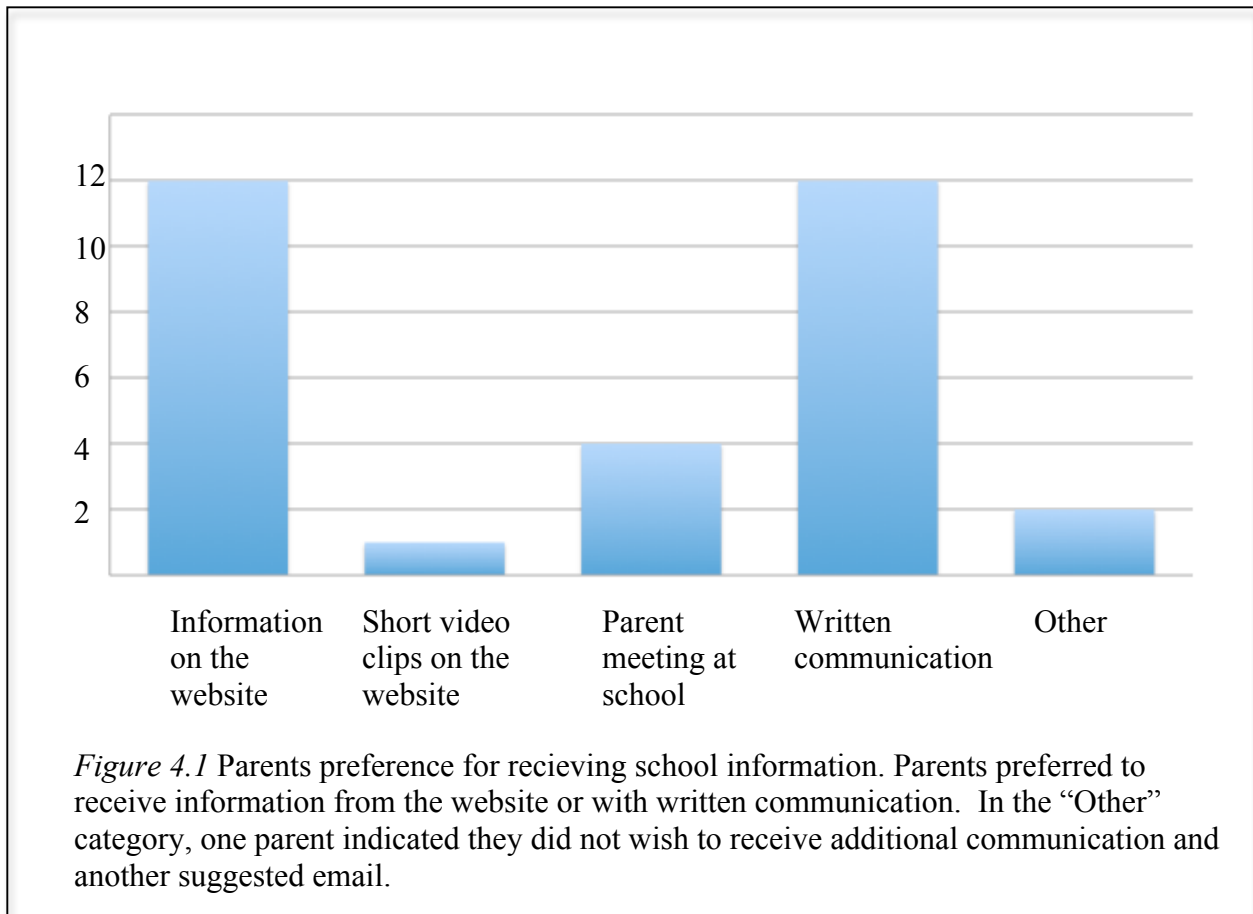
Initially, the intent was to analyze data from the surveys using quantitative methods. One particular area of interest was the correlation of parents who attended the initial parent meeting and their future understanding of the report card. However, the results were surprising.

Table 4.1

Questions Asked of All Second Grade Parents in the Survey and the Responses Received

<u>Question</u>	<u>Responses</u>	
Do you believe the new report card gives you information to discuss with your child?	97% YES	3% NO
Do you believe the new report card gives you information to discuss with your child's teacher?	97% YES	3% NO
How user-friendly is the new report card?	100% I understand it.	No suggestions for improvement.
If you attended the information session, how would you rate the session?	100% Very Informative	No suggestions for improvement.

Parents overwhelmingly believed the new report card gave information they could use to discuss with their child and their child's teacher. Only one parent indicated they did not believe that could be the case. That parent's comments gave much insight into why that was not the case and is discussed later in this chapter. Of those parents that attended the information session held during the first quarter of the year, all believed the session was very informative. All parents indicated they understood the grade card. Due to the lack of variance in the survey, quantitative measures were limited to a percentage of agreement. A comments section on the survey elicited positive remarks about the new report cards, including, "Doing a good job," and "I think it is very user friendly. It is easier for both students and parents to read and understand."



Parents were asked a general question about how they would like to receive information about the report card. Parents were allowed to choose as many or as few as they liked on the question. The hope was to reach more families with information about the report card the following year by utilizing preferred methods of communication. As shown in the graph above, most preferred information was on the website and written communication coming home from the school. The website would include both the school’s official website and Facebook page. Written communication usually comes home in the form of notes or newsletters. Four parents stated they liked the meeting at school while one preferred a short video clip on the website. Two parents chose the “other” category and included email and no additional information.

Focus Group and Interviews

Second grade parents were also invited to attend a focus group to discuss the new report card. Multiple focus group sessions were offered at varying times throughout the day and on different days. The initial session was held in April but with only two attendees. During the focus group, these parents shared their feelings openly. Initially, parent interviews from the focus groups were planned to gain information from those attending the focus group that might not have shared openly with the group. However, both participants responded to all questions and any further interviews with these parents would have been redundant. Effort was made to reach out to other parents through additional focus group opportunities in the same year, but no additional participants could be found. Therefore, three fall sessions were held with five, three, and two participants respectively.

Each second grade teacher participated in an individual interview. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, except one. Due to technical errors one interview was not recorded. Therefore, field notes and the interviewer's memo immediately following the interview were used to gain data from that particular interview. Since the researcher is also the building leader, memos and reflective journaling were utilized as well.

Several major themes emerged while looking at the qualitative data collected through the surveys, focus group, and interviews. A primary method of provisional coding was utilized as this was a study intended to identify strengths and weaknesses in certain areas of the implementation. A second round of coding utilized in vivo and open coding methods to find any themes that might not have been targeted but became important to the study. Four major themes were identified through the qualitative portion of the study: structure and understandability of the report card, fairness and accuracy, alternate report cards, and teacher usability.

Themes

Structure and Understandability of the Report Card

Parents, via the survey and focus group, indicated the report card was easily understood and they felt comfortable reading and using the information it provided. In discussing the transition, one teacher indicated no issues in transitioning with parents, “That may be because they were used to a different style grade card from previous years. I did not have any transition problems or concerns.” During the focus group, one parent specifically stated, “The grade card was pretty self-explanatory so there wasn’t a whole lot I didn’t understand just by seeing it.” Other parents commented, “I think they’re pretty self-explanatory,” “I understood it,” and “I got enough information.” One of the later focus group parents mentioned “we had these type of grade cards in first grade, so I understood it.” Teachers, specifically, noted the ease of conversations with parents related to the color-coding system. In fact, it was noted by three of the four teachers as one major area they would not want changed. When asked if there were things that should be changed, one teacher noted, “I do not want the colors changed! I like those colors. They are very easy for kids to relate to...they understand that and it’s just as important those kids understand the grade card as it is the parents.” One teacher referenced how she was using it with students:

I’ve even had a couple instances where we start out green but now we are getting more yellows...just saying that you may need to put more effort in this...I know you can do this. Look, we were doing it, but now we’re not.

A third teacher stated:

One thing I don’t want to change would be the report scale that we have set up as well as the red, green, and yellow. Some of the skills might need to change here and there, but red, green, and yellow works well.

Memo writing reflecting on the use of the stoplight colors led to the conclusion that this might be one way we have stopped parents from trying to create letter grades from a standards-based reporting system:

The stoplight colors appear to be one of the best aspects of this grade card. Teachers and parents seem to appreciate them and believe they are easily understood. What has surprised me to some extent is that no parent has asked how each color relates to a letter grade. This was one of the concerns identified during discussions with other administrators using standards-based grading, but there doesn't seem to be any of that comparison happening. Perhaps it is because there are 3 levels instead of the 5 levels assumed by actual letter grades.

One parent did ask if there was a way to show growth even if it wasn't enough to raise a color. In her words, "he has like three things that he's yellow on and it's like he's yellow, yellow, yellow." One comment from a parent regarding the colors spoke about the connection between daily grades and the final grade on the report card. She said:

If we are going to do red, yellow, green, I'm not sure why the papers are coming home graded. It's hard to hold my kid accountable for a percentage grade on daily work when the final grade will be red, yellow, or green.

The same parent expanded that comment when she said one of the changes she'd like to see included, "Throughout the semester, students track red, yellow green, instead of just on the grade card."

One teacher noted that while the order and quarter the individual objectives were assessed may need to change, the actual content of the grade card worked well. One teacher noted that deciding on content was one of the most difficult times in the process for her:

I didn't like it at the time, but not letting me look at those standards and saying, 'No, what do you want your kids to be able to do by the end of the year?' Actually that was the best thing, not looking at those standards first but just to think... 'What would you like a second grader to look like at the end?'

Teachers indicated the standards were appropriate and needed few changes, but that the time frame for mastery needed adjustments. While the order may need to be adjusted, one teacher

liked that “it goes in order of when the skills are taught.” Two teachers indicated specifically that changes needed to be made to the order of the standards prior to implementation of the new curriculum. One teacher commented on the district assessment portion of the grade card, “I like the AimsWeb testing on there.” Even a parent stated, “I like having the AIMS scores.” Another parent commented on the structure of the AIMS scores on the report card, “I like that it has what the goal is.”

Parents indicated overall understanding of the document on the survey and during the focus group. Parents indicated they understood the standards as written. So, while there is a need to adjust the order and timing of the standards, the wording is sufficiently understandable. This does speak to the importance of a fluid document that can be easily changed as curriculum changes or other adjustments need to be made.

During the focus group, a follow-up question was asked about the “specials” listed on the grade card. Parents indicated they wanted to know how their child was doing in the specials (music, computers, PE, library) but didn’t need specific skills for those classes, but more overall participation. The report cards provide additional information for parents that they haven’t received in the past, specifically effort in specials classes and student success (behavior and work habits) skills. One teacher specifically mentioned the student success skills, saying:

I like the behavior portion in there. I like the specials portion being added. I think that’s important because you might have a kid good in the classroom, but one who gets in trouble during computers. I never would have guessed it. So, I like that part on there.

Parents on the survey and in the focus group noted the ease of understanding the report card. They indicated they understood how their child was performing and what areas they were doing really well in and where they needed more assistance. Survey data from parents as well as information from the focus group participants indicate that the information is understandable.

One parent called it “self-explanatory.” One parent in the focus group compared how the standards were divided with another school in the district:

One thing I noticed I liked more about Higher Elementary... Yours were separated in reading/writing/math. [The other school] are more reading/writing mixed and then math. That can get confusing. I like it better separating the components. I know reading and writing kind of go together, but I'd still like more separation.

Another parent also commented she liked that “skills were broken down within the subject.”

Another parent stated that she also liked “seeing what’s coming up in the next quarter. I know these are things I maybe can start working on at home.”

Parents indicated that the AIMSWeb (reading and math benchmark assessment) scores were valuable information to include on the grade card and appreciated that the expected values were also listed. This changed for the next year as AIMSWEB is changed the assessments for each grade level. This presented a unique challenge, as simply including it on the grade card did not suffice for ensuring parents understand where their child is scoring on grade level benchmark assessments. In order to assist parents in understanding the assessment, a brochure was sent home with the first report card. However, during one of the later focus groups, a few parents mentioned getting it and looking at it, while other parents could not even recall the brochure. However, one parent commented, “The parent meeting you had was helpful, especially to discuss the differences in the assessments this year.” Utilizing information from the focus group and surveys, parents indicated they were able to understand the purpose of the grade card, how to contact the child’s teacher, and could discuss it with their child.

During the focus group, parents indicated they utilized the Successful Student Traits (work habits and social skills) the most with their child. This was one of the hopes of that section because it is where teachers felt parents could help the most, encouraging those traits in

their child. This section received heightened importance from both teachers and parents. One parent put it like this:

One thing I appreciate is the behavior is separated from knowledge and skills. You can have a child that has issues with following directions and simply how to get along at school that knows the content really well, and vice versa. If I could ask for one thing not to change that would be it.

Another parent simply said, "I like the behavior portion."

In order to help parents better understand the grade card, multiple areas of communication were attempted. One goal of this study was to determine if that communication was successful and should continue. Parents noted that while the "grade card was pretty self-explanatory," it was "nice that we had a meeting for anybody, you know just kind of a come and see it and hear what it is and why." One parent stated that part of the draw for attending the meeting was getting their child's report card a day early. A teacher commented, "...you've had lots of opportunities for parents to know what's going on, whether they've taken that or not. I think we've done a good job of communicating with what we've had." Neither parent in the April focus group remembered the communication from earlier in the year about the report card. One parent in the focus group spoke specifically to a communication strategy being used by the teacher, saying, "I can text anytime I have a question. I love having communication." The same parent suggested, "Could you...put lines up there so teachers could make comments about each skill. She may note at the bottom she's seen improvement, but at the bottom is kind of an overall, not specific to those areas." The overarching attitudes about communication from parents seemed that they really felt more that the communication was nice, especially the information about why we changed, but that the report card itself was self-explanatory and very little additional information was necessary. One parent commented, "Parent-teacher conferences help with understanding." Several parents made comments such as, "I like the teacher comments

because they're really helpful." When asked what they liked most, one parent stated simply "teacher comments." These comments appeared to help parents understand specifics about how their child was performing. These conferences fall just after the first report card is sent home. However, one teacher noted that making sure parents received the grade card was important:

It needs to be signed by the parents so we know that parents actually see it...we used to just have the envelope signed. That way the grade card didn't actually come back. But, I just feel better...knowing that, yes, parents saw the grade card.

While schools cannot force parents to look at the report card or make them have meaningful conversations with their child or teacher, teachers felt the need to make sure parents at least have that opportunity. Requiring a signature was suggested to create that opportunity.

Fairness and Accuracy

Interestingly, neither parents completing the survey nor parents involved in the focus group commented on making sure the grades were fair or accurate. However, every teacher interviewed commented in some way about making sure they were giving fair and accurate grades. One teacher stated, "We tried to grade the same way, I'm not sure how accurate we are with that." When asked about her biggest concern, a teacher responded, "Just being fair and accurate throughout all second grades." Another teacher put it, "trying to figure out what I'm trying to pay attention to and if everyone is agreeing with me and grading the same." A third teacher elaborated, "...you have four teachers that have their own opinions. We tried to grade the same way, I'm not sure how accurate we are with that. We try to do our best with that." The same teacher identified this as her biggest concern, "...just being fair and accurate throughout all second grades." This is definitely an area that will be a focus for next year. While teachers were able to mark scores, there still seems to be some concern about being accurate in reporting and

understanding which assessments they should use to determine mastery. One teacher said it this way:

My challenge is trying to figure out which pages to use for each standard. Like what things to actually take a grade on and which things don't matter as much. Which things need to be recorded and which do not, especially with the math series. There are things on there that weren't in the book so finding that material and knowing which things to use and what not to.

Every teacher mentioned the need to better align assessments and communicate more frequently with other teachers in order to make sure they were being fair in their grading.

This theme really played into assessments as well. Assessment was a theme intended to be identified in the study, but it seemed during the interviews that this was really a subtopic about being fair and accurate. Teachers wanted to make sure the assessments they were using were similar to others at the grade level, making it fair, and that it assessed what the standard actually called for, making it accurate. One teacher stated her biggest challenge as, "trying to figure out which pages to use for each standard. What things need to be recorded?" When discussing professional development needs, teachers specifically noted they needed time to communicate within their grade level to make sure everyone is "grading the same." One teacher linked the difficulties to an outdated math series, "We haven't always nailed it down (what to assess) exactly...I think if we had a different math series it would be easier. It is harder right now to do that." During interviews, teachers made strong connections between assessment, instruction, and curriculum. All of these played a part in how well teachers felt they were able to accurately determine a student's mastery level.

Alternate Report Cards

One individual survey bears note. While the survey indicated that the parent believed the document was easy to understand, she noted that it was very inappropriate for her son. She

referenced the need for an alternate grade card for students working on an individualized curriculum, specifically stating, “The card as it is presently is easily understood, but doesn’t really apply to him...Based on my son’s IEP the new cards are mostly irrelevant.” This survey was very important because we would expect this need to only occur one or two times each year. Therefore, although only one parent referenced the need, it was significant. This parent’s comments made it obvious she was aware that an alternate grade card would be used the following year for her child and noted the importance of that concept. This directly relates to the research by Jung & Guskey (2011) that discusses the importance of an alternate grade card for students where modifications must be made to the curriculum. During memo writing, the following experience was noted regarding the use of the report card in regard to modifications to curriculum:

Utilizing the new report card during an individualized education plan led to a deeper discussion about what the child truly could do and could not do. While this student in the past would have, most likely, received A’s and B’s, the report card actually showed parents where this child was at in comparison to his peers. This helped facilitate a conversation about the needs, accommodations, and modifications required to help the child be successful.

Teacher Usability

Teachers were asked if they were able to use the report card to change their instruction. They indicated it helped focus their re-teaching and even helped know which students needed to have some time to continue working on previous skills. Teachers stated they better understood which students needed re-teaching, but, as one teacher put it, she needs “ways to help catch those kiddos up and still move on.” Teachers didn’t necessarily give indications of differentiation within their lesson structure that came from utilizing information from the report card. One concern that was raised early in the process was that not everything we taught was on the report card. One teacher commented on this:

It just seems like not everything is on there. And I am like doing all this and it doesn't fit anywhere on here. It's hard to switch that line of thinking that, we're still doing it, it's still important. I have that in the back of my head. It's reminding myself of that.

One teacher commented she uses it to cue some students that this is a vital skill, "I remind the kids on a regular basis, 'This skill is on your grade card; it's something we're checking to see how well you do.' It's a good reminder for them."

Teachers also mentioned the importance of good tools, namely a grade book. All four teachers mentioned something about how they organize the information they will eventually put onto the report card. For example, one teacher put it bluntly, "The grade book I especially need to change for next year." In the past, teachers' grade books have been a simple recording of the assignment and the percentage. This method has not worked when implementing standards-based reporting. One teacher stated:

This year, I basically did mine by each story or unit we were doing. I'm not going to do that next year. Next year, it's really going to be, really a standards-based grade book. So, it's going to have each skill and look at each test...I will just have to pull from each test what goes and where it fits.

Some teachers noted a need to break apart a test and record scores for individual or groups of questions instead of the test as a whole while other stated they needed something that had the expected assessments on it so they would know what items they needed to look at for mastery.

Suggestions for better recording systems varied from a technology component to collaborating with each other to link actual pages with standards for recording purposes. For one teacher interviewed, technology was the answer. She stated:

I would love to be able to make some kind of an app where I could do all this on the iPad...If we would ever get to that system, that would just be amazing, to be able to click on the color and that's what it is.

While creating an app is currently outside the realms the school's abilities, there are plans to utilize an online spreadsheet that has some similar functions for those observational style

assessments. Finding a way for teachers to have a usable record book is definitely a high priority for next year's implementation. Many teachers mentioned the need to record learning by skill instead of in a grade book with a page per subject. One teacher stated, "...through the year, I've realized how I've been keeping grades in some instances don't really work and I need to change that for next year, so I've got plans to change it." It may mean several options are out there and they choose the one that works best for them. One teacher even mentioned pre-creating those grade book pages with the expected assessments filled in so teachers know which assessments they've decided as a grade level should count toward mastery. Teachers need an option to utilize as a grade book that looks and acts differently than those they used in the past.

Teachers noted the grade card added specificity. One teacher stated, "it zeros you into areas instead of just a subject," while another teacher said, "I like that you can look at and see exactly what the problem is... You can be more specific on what skill that child needs." She also noted, "later on, you can see growth in those areas instead of just a percent." A different teacher stated this as a strength of the grade card, "It actually says what individual areas children are succeeding in and maybe what they need to work on." Another comment from a teacher spoke to individuality, "it helps me to see what each kid needs to work on individually." A teacher commented that she didn't need extensive notes about kids during conferences because the report card provided her with the information she wanted to share with parents. She noted that during conversations about student success skills, she was able to talk with a parent about a child who wasn't working very hard during one of his specials classes and that score was much lower than other scores in the classroom. When another teacher was asked how it changed her parent communication, she said:

...it zeros you down into areas instead of just a subject. We're talking more about what things...hey, I can see that your child does really well in this area but maybe he or she needs a little more work on this one.

She also noted that the progress report, which just contains student success skills, was a great tool for communication with parents because parents were able to see those behavior type skills and have conversations with their child. She stated, "I think seeing those different colors go home that weren't so pretty; they had a talk at home, and they've been a lot better since then."

While teachers commented on how they shared with parents, they also noted a desire to build parent communication back with the school. One teacher commented the hardest part of the process was "we didn't have the feedback we were originally wanting to have." She continued by saying, "I would love that magic wand to be able to get parents to come in and talk and share, but I don't have that answer." These concerns indicate that teachers may be using the report cards to communicate more frequently and specifically with parents, but the lack of parent communication with teachers may need to be an area of focus. One teacher commented about how she used the process to communicate with students, discussing how she used the report card system if there was a "need to conference with a student, for various reasons."

During a review of completed report cards, it became obvious that teachers did have the materials to score each individual standard. While interviews indicated a deeper need to align the assessments, teachers were able to report on each standard. A review of the student success skills indicated that teachers were able to differentiate between each skill. So, a student was not simply all green or all red.

Several teachers noted increased awareness of individual students and identified it as a powerful effect of standards-based grading, including one who stated:

It makes teachers...more aware of each individual. When you start putting grades in...this kid really struggled with this, we need to go grab it. I pay more attention to that,

because I have to mark it down in my grade book that way. You can specify what they need.

Another teacher noted the ability to better group students with peer models that have mastered the individual skill a particular student might need. One teacher specifically spoke about the changes to math interventions and the ability for students who needed specific skill intervention to receive those skills. Finally, one teacher sees it as more freedom from meaningless assignments. She states, “I actually don’t worry about having enough scores to validate their final percent. I don’t worry about that now because they just worry about concepts instead of a grade.”

Teachers mostly spoke of changes to their instruction in terms of intervention time or even peer modeling. One teacher specifically mentioned peer modeling, “you can see who needs help with what and in what areas. You can pair them up with someone who’s doing better in that area so they can be a peer tutor for them.” Teachers didn’t necessarily articulate how they were making it happen in the classroom except to mention that time was always a factor. As one teacher stated when asked about challenges:

...within the classroom, going back and still working on those old things to get the up because nothing is ever left behind so still being able to catch then up on past things and still be moving forward in other areas.

As teachers become more adept at utilizing the reporting system as well as the new reading and math series, differentiation may need to be an area for professional development, particularly how to work it into the schedule of an already busy day. Time was the biggest barrier to utilizing the information. Teachers didn’t note any major changes to their classroom instruction. This may indicate that they don’t view these as changes or that few changes have taken place.

Teachers didn’t note the need for professional development around instruction, but further observation may lead to a focus on more differentiated models of instruction as teachers are

better able to gain usable data from this method of reporting student learning. Unfortunately, the first year has been more about the process and less about the instruction changes. As discussed in the literature, change is a lengthy process and does not happen all at once. The limited timeline of this study makes it difficult to assess long-term impacts on teacher instruction.

One concern, early in the process, was that students would not respond as well to the instruction if they were not being motivated by a letter grade. One teacher responded:

I've kind of noticed kids really only notice a 100%. If they miss one or if they miss 10, I'm not sure how much of a concept they've got on that. That's probably not a good thing, but they know that 100% and if it's not a 100%. After that, they really don't know or care...but now, I'm just kind of talking about how many you got correct. I'm not doing the percent or anything like that. So, I don't see it as a loss of effort. I mean, kids are still working and they're focusing on what they get right instead of what they get wrong.

While some teachers commented on a concern for this early in the development stages of standards-based grading, it did not appear to be a topic of concern for teachers or parents during the pilot of the report card.

Teachers did note a few professional development items that they felt were needed to increase their ability to utilize the standards-based grade cards. These items were mostly about collaborating with other teachers, both in the building and outside the building. One teacher said, "...having someone to bounce ideas off of, to make sure I know I'm on the right page, that page does do that skill and goes with that standard." They needed to hear from teachers in other systems that were using the standards-based grading model, specifically to "get ideas on how they set up their grade books." For other teachers, collaboration and communication time was strongly based within their own context and building. It included spending time within their grade level and with others in the school discussing how they were assessing and grading. One comment about the most helpful part of the initial process centered on collaboration, "...the time

we've had together working on it. That's the most beneficial." Even after the fact, collaboration time was identified as extremely important. One teacher spoke specifically about the need for close vertical alignment, "I think we do a good job at grade levels, that sharing and stuff, but maybe across grade levels. Maybe first grade coming into second grade..." One teacher eluded to professional development in instruction when she stated, "The only thing I can think of is, 'ok, they have this, now what next?' ...kind of a way to help catch those kiddos up and still move on." During this pilot year, teachers appeared to value professional development that helped them become better at filling out the document.

Conclusion

While formal information from parents was limited, parents seem to react positively, feeling the report card is usable and understandable. Teachers also indicated overall positive results with the new report card. They spoke specifically to the tools and assessments needed to insure usability, fairness, and accuracy. Finally, one parent's comments solidified the need to consider alternate report cards for the small number of students needing a modified curriculum. Chapter five will discuss possible reasons for the lack of formal information from parents, conclusions drawn from the study, and suggestions for practitioners.

Chapter 5

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the success of a standards-based grading initiative in meeting its goals. Furthermore, findings from this study will be used to inform decisions made in future grade level implementations. For this study, data was collected from both parents and teachers of second grade students. The intent was to conduct a study that would assist building leaders with the process of refining the second grade report card and successfully implementing a new report card in third grade as well.

Literature Review Reflection

In the review of the literature, multiple authors recognize the importance of high-leverage strategies, or those strategies that can make the most impact within a system. Reeves (2011) identified grading as one of these high-leverage strategies. However, he included the importance of effectively implementing the strategy if it is to make the most impact in a system. Grading is truly a modification of an entire system and interacts with multiple parts of the system, such as assessments, communication, personnel, and culture. This leads to an important focus on systems-thinking when looking at how all the components of standards-based grading fit into the system as a whole. As grading affects the entire system, its effect on exceptional learners must be considered. Educators at Higher Elementary utilized Jung and Guskey's (2011) work to address the modifications and accommodations this grading system provides for exceptional learners. Kotter and Rathgeber's (2005) steps involved in the change process guided deep thinking about how a change initiative of this magnitude would be undertaken. Dweck's (2006) information on growth mindsets opened the door to thinking about how a student's mindset

could affect their motivation in a new grading system. Mental health research linked trauma events and lower student achievement (TASN, 2016; Wolpow et al., 2016).

Data Collection Reflection

The data collection process varied somewhat from the process that was originally planned. Teacher data collection was completed, as planned, through individual interviews with each teacher. The only change was one technology malfunction that caused an interview to not be recorded. Field notes and a researcher's memo were utilized to glean information from that interview. It was felt that teachers were honest and open about the positives and needs of the current system.

The major changes in the collection process were found in the parent component. It was hoped that a larger focus group could lead to a few individual interviews that would provide a well-rounded overview of parents' thoughts and opinions. However, it proved very difficult to get parents to attend the focus groups and those groups were small. Individual interviews were not held with those two parents because additional information was unlikely. However, approximately half of the parents returned the survey. There was overwhelming indication the report cards were understandable and usable by parents.

Findings Reflection

While the data collection process turned out much differently than expected, chapter four really speaks to a misconception about this study from the beginning. It was assumed parents would face the greatest change during the implementation of standards-based grading. However, because these parents experienced a checklist style of standards-based grading in prior years, the change for them was minimal. However, the change for teachers was much greater. Teachers indicated the change was positive and allows them to be more specific about their children's

learning, but identified several challenges in the process. The tools available for teachers to use, as well as the assessments are vital to the process and were areas that teachers felt needed more structure, change, or development. This was even apparent during the focus groups and interviews. Teachers had a lot to say about the process and the things that needed to be fixed or stay the same. Even parents in the focus group that freely shared their thoughts and opinions had very little to say about how to improve the process or the document itself. Instead a portion of the focus group bird-walked into how they could help their child master standards where they were struggling. This led me to two conclusions:

1. The change process really involved teachers more than the parents. In this particular situation parents had previously received a checklist style grade card, so the change for them was only in the structure and content of the report card, and less so in the actual style of grading. Teachers, on the other hand, completely had to change the way they assess, report, and, hopefully, instruct. The major change was on the school side. Their comments proved they felt the large shift in importance of skills, individualization, and needed tools and support to make that happen.
2. If we can create a report card parents understand and can use, they become much more focused on how they can help their child. One parent commented her child would love, "...games they could do [at home]." Finding a way to ensure parents are able to use the report card as a tool refocuses them on what we actually want them doing, reinforcing skills at home and engaging with their child about what they are learning at school.

Conclusions from the Study

No Delta Indicators

One teacher commented,

It just seems like not everything is on there. And I am like doing all this and it doesn't fit anywhere on here. It's hard to switch that line of thinking that, we're still doing it, it's still important. I have that in the back of my head. It's reminding myself of that.

This comment served as a warning that we must be careful to not let our standards-based report card become, in essence, “delta-ed” indicators. During the years of high-stakes testing in Kansas, certain standards from the standards document were labeled with deltas. This indicated the standards would be tested that year. Those standards became known as the “delta-ed” indicators and were taught with the most fidelity. Unfortunately, the atmosphere of high-stakes testing led to a lack of focus on those items that did not contain delta indicators and those were the ones left out of the curriculum when time ran out that year. Unfortunately, these were the building blocks in the curriculum for future skills, leaving students behind in the future. This will need to be closely monitored.

The Mindset Component

Throughout the last decade, testing and assessments have dominated the educational conversation. In the coming decade, it is likely to be mental health and mindset that take center stage. So with every change or initiative it is becoming increasingly important to identify the effect on a child's mental well-being and mindset. Research shows that a student's intelligence or growth mindset “influences their motivation and achievement” (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016, p. 859). Even students with a fixed mindset are able to see specific growth on standards-based report cards. One parent commented during a focus group that the report card was “helpful because we knew we had all year to make that progress.” Haimovitz and Dweck (2016) found

that impacts on motivation and achievement can be observed when students naturally have that mindset or are taught that mindset. With specific thought guidance from parents and teachers, standards-based grading may be a specific method of teaching students to have a stronger growth mindset, therefore increasing student achievement and motivation. Where letter-based grading systems combine lots of information into one score, students may see that score as an external score that does not relate to their particular work or growth. Teachers would need to specifically reference the work a student has done that allowed them to make improvements in that particular area so students are able to equate their hard work with increased achievement. Teachers should pay close attention to how that student overcame failure. As referenced in Chapter 2, improving a students' growth mindset may also help negate or decrease the academic effects of a child living in poverty (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016). The school has over half of its students considered low-income, so poverty is a major concern for student achievement in the school.

One particular area of interest not studied in this research is how the behavioral components of a parents' growth mindset impact the child's growth mindset of those as well. Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck (2016) found that parents' intelligence mindset was not an indicator of a child's intelligence mindset, but their failure mindset was an indicator of both a child's failure and intelligence mindsets. While not studied, comments heard from parents may indicate they don't believe their child's behavior is malleable. For example, a child who was marked low for using time wisely might result in a parents comment, "he's just always been slow-moving." This type of fixed mindset regarding behavior might impact how a child views the malleability of their behavior. Unfortunately, when conversing with parents about student behavior, I frequently hear, "Oh, that just him. He's always been that way," or, "She's just a talker." Student success traits make up a significant portion of the new report card. If parents believe

these traits are fixed, the new report cards might actually encourage parents not to attempt to help students change those behaviors and simply see them as part of their child's makeup.

Standards-based report cards may also help identify and support students struggling with mental illness or those who've experienced trauma. Through the use of standards-based report cards, we are able to track specific skills where students are not making adequate growth or any growth at all. If we know that students who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) struggle to gain academic knowledge, we may be able to identify students who may need counseling for a traumatic event by identifying students who have been unable to make academic progress even after multiple academic interventions and working through a problem solving strategy that involves a trauma-informed approach. This may be especially important for students who have experienced moderate trauma as they may not be as readily identifiable as students with extreme trauma in their past (Duplechain, Reigner & Packard, 2008). If a teacher is able to track specific learning objectives and can identify specific and multiple interventions targeted those specific skills, one conversation for a student improvement team involves looking at reasons a student may not be progressing. Usually these conversations revolve around the time, behavior, or instructor providing the interventions. However, upon learning that ACEs significantly impact learning, these conversations may need to broaden to include mental wellness components as well. Because a traditional grading system lumps all academic content and student success skills into one grade, it's difficult to determine if a student is making growth on previous content after specific intervention or if other issues are at play. However, standards-based report cards can target those specific skills and provide warning signals that students may not be progressing. This lack of progression may indicate a need for a mental well-being

discussion, specifically focused on the presence of ACEs in a child's life and specific interventions for targeting the mental well-being of the child.

Often, students with mental health needs focus only on the negative, thereby continuing to decrease their mental well-being and perpetuating their belief that negative things happen to them. This is one reason educators are encouraged to find ways for students to be successful. Standards-based report cards help teachers show students how they can be successful. Even if a child is not improving in one area, say returning homework, a teacher can praise their efforts in working well with others creating a positive moment for that student. With students, positive moments tend to breed positive moments. When a child is having more positive moments, their mental well-being may also improve. Because standards-based report cards create specificity, it may be easier to assist students in finding specific successes.

Parent Involvement

Initially this study intended to collect a large amount of data from parents, with the hope of including every second grade parents' thoughts and opinions. However, involving parents became one of the major challenges of this study. Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) speak specifically about getting families involved in the school and many of their thoughts include activities where the parents are at the school. Historically, we've judged parent involvement in the school: who has the biggest PTO's, most attendance at family nights, or best carnival. What if this is not an accurate picture of what parent involvement should actually look like? Henderson, et al. (2007) continue by talking about how important it is to communicate with parents about learning as well. What if, instead, parent involvement is about parents talking nightly with their kids about learning, communicating one-on-one with teachers about how they can help their child, and finding ways to support school objective through what they do every

day at home? What if parent involvement looked like having their child double the cookie recipe when they are studying fractions or counting back change from the grocery store when the class is studying money?

Keeping this in mind, it may be that the lack of participation in this study is not a result of poor parent involvement as parents did speak to the desire of finding ways to help their child and support learning and participation at learning-related events, such as conferences and music programs, remains very strong. However, parent involvement is a multi-faceted topic as most education topics are. It is possible that while parents value being involved in the school and their child's education, they don't feel their opinions are heard and valued. It could be that the thought of a meeting is not appealing to parents or that time is the deciding factor. This is an area the school needs to further research and discuss.

One teacher in the study commented she is "not sure parents always got to see the report card." This does speak to a significant need in response to parent involvement. Her suggestion involved sending the report cards home in envelopes and then asking the envelopes to be returned signed so we knew parents had the chance to see the report card. This is one way to ensure access for parents to a report on their child's learning. While we send reminders that report cards are coming home via Facebook, newsletters, and phone messages, this would ensure parents know the report card came home. When looking at parent involvement as parents being actively involved in their child's learning, not just school events, it becomes increasingly important that we provide ways for parents to access the information they need to engage with their children. This report cards certainly requires a shift in how parents look at their child's education. This process asks parents to shift from focusing on a child's grades to look at their learning instead. During one of the later focus groups, one parent commented, "I don't know if

my child is approaching failure...with A's and F's I can tell them you need this many A's to bring your grade up." This shift in thinking needs to be encouraged by educators whenever working with parents, understanding that this is a difficult shift to make.

During a reflexive memo completed after transcribing the first focus group it was noted that I spoke more than the participants. During the interview, this did not seem to be the case, but the transcription proved it to be true. After reviewing the transcription, I noted that parents answered several of my questions with questions of their own, which I then answered as best I could. It might have proved more valuable to have a different person lead the focus groups, perhaps even a parent. This might have led to a more open discussion and possibly even stronger attendance. It would also serve to begin developing and growing parent leaders within the school system.

Working through the Grading Change and Future Plans

As discussed above, the change process was really focused on teacher change, instead of parent change as initially thought during the study. Teachers really need more access to tools, specifically recording tools and assessing tools. This needs to be the focus for the coming year. The need for fluidity may be the most important reminder for staff and leadership while working with standards-based grade cards. Teachers noted several necessary changes to the grade card and spoke specifically about the order of the standards and how it related to current curriculum. As curriculum changes, the report card must shift as well.

In order for this initiative to remain a high-leverage strategy that has the potential to impact multiple areas of the system, it is important that a continuous review process be put into place to review the needs of the system related to standards-based grading. This may include future communication with parents, specifically around any changes that might occur to the

system. It needs to include review of the content and pacing of the report card, as well as updates to assessments and tools for the system. Continuous review of an initiative is vital to keeping it current. However, in schools needs change quickly. Specifically at Higher Elementary where there's a fifty percent turnover in students each year. This means that the needs of the building change quickly. It becomes easy for a school to begin addressing new needs and put older initiatives to the side. If standards-based grading is to reach the long-term goals of the project, it must continue to be a reviewed initiative each year.

One particular teacher noted, "I think if we had a different math series it would be easier. It is harder right now to do that." One positive, unexpected outcome was a deeper understanding by teachers of the limitations of their current mathematics curriculum. When teachers are being required to address specific standards and have deep conversations about the assessments surrounding those standards, a sub-par curriculum can become a hindrance, inciting a desire to move forward with a curriculum change. One of the changes at Higher Elementary created, in part, by this study was the implementation of a common, quality math curriculum to be implemented by all teachers.

Limitations/Struggles with the Study

The largest struggle in this study was getting parents to give feedback. There may be many reasons for this:

- The timing was not ideal. Initially the hope was to have focus groups immediately after parents received their third quarter report cards so they were fresh on their mind. During the focus group parents even mentioned they wished they could remember better what was on the grade card. However, the project timeline did not allow for that to happen. Then, when a focus group opportunity was given immediately after fourth quarter report

cards, the school year was over and parents were focused on summer activities. Having the initial focus group earlier in the spring would also have missed more sporting events, instead of landing right at the beginning of summer sports.

- Parents may not have felt comfortable contributing to the conversation with the principal. However, during conversations with teachers, they spoke about their formal and informal conversations with parents. None of them had any concerns or suggestions from parents who would not only feel comfortable with them as their child's teacher, but as their friend in many cases. It is worth noting that while the focus groups were small in number, the data collected are consistent with the information teachers also received from parents during their informal conversations.
- Perhaps the reason most supported by the data is that parents did not share because they did not see a problem. While there seems to be little research on this phenomenon, school leaders will tell you that things are quiet when all is going well. When it is not going well, the feedback abounds. In this case, data from the survey, teacher feedback, parent feedback, and lack of complaints seem to support this conclusion. Parents' survey data spoke to the fact that parents found the report card easy to understand and useful. Teachers' conversations with parents were positive and held no misunderstandings, discontent, or confusions. No negative feedback came to the building principal, superintendent, or school board.

One additional struggle could also be listed as a strength of the study. Since the building leader conducted the study there is strong support and viability for making the changes indicated by the study. However, this did add some limitations. It made it difficult to "hound" parents about participating as maintaining good relationships is important. Also, some items came out

during interviews that really were not related to the study, but is important feedback that needed addressed. This also limited the ownership of the study to the building leader in the study.

Ideally, teachers would have helped conduct some parent groups and heard the feedback while they conversed with parents. While this did happen informally when teachers talked with parents during conferences and phone calls, the information was then received second-hand to the study itself. Unfortunately, the singularity of the ownership means that teachers are only hearing the feedback instead of participating in and building the feedback.

Finally, the length of the study was a limitation as well. It was important for this to be a short-lived study so the feedback could be used during the implementation of the third grade report card the following year. However, it limited the scope of what could be studied. There was some interest in studying the effect these report cards would have on student motivation and possibly parent encouragement for student motivation. However, it was necessary to keep the scope of the study limited, so necessary changes could be made quickly. Student motivation does present itself as a topic for additional research. One teacher noted no significant change in motivation this year, but this could also have been a reflection of students within her classroom this year. This is certainly a topic for future study. However, additional initiatives with students, such as a focus on growth mindset and reduction of support services due to funding, may impact this area in ways that make it difficult to determine a specific cause for an increase or decrease in motivation.

Future Research Topics

Parent involvement and feedback leads the topics that need further research. This particular school has great involvement in parents when there are needs. For example, parents volunteer to come help on special days, bring treats, cut out box tops, and donate to a cause.

However, meetings or conversations have very little participation. Site council rarely has more than a few participants and the Parent Teacher Organization stopped meeting many years ago. However, there is never a lack of parent help or volunteers. This may speak to a shift in society as many of our parents spend their days in meetings as opposed to a large portion of stay-at-home moms. This lack of input is especially troubling as the state shifts to a new accreditation system that leans heavily on input from various community stakeholders. Finding ways to actively engage those stakeholders may very well be important to a district's accreditation.

Another topic for further study is the idea of student motivation. This study was too early in the process to determine how standards-based report cards would affect motivation with students. Very early in the process, a teacher mentioned this as one of her largest concerns. With only one grade level and one year during the study, this was not observed and may be an area for further study. However, one teacher noted during the study that "kids really only notice a 100%." She stated that in some of her observations, if they got one, some, or all wrong, it was really the same thing to the students. She stated that she still notices kids are working and now, they are "focusing on what they get right instead of what they get wrong."

As discussed earlier, the impact of growth mindset on a child's achievement or improvement on the report card is an interesting topic for future study as well. One area for future study would be how students of different mindsets react differently to their report card. However, possibly even more interesting is the reactions of parents with varying mindsets and how they interact differently with their child regarding the report card. This may be as important or more important when dealing with seven, eight, and nine year olds.

Finally, only the short-term goals for the initiative could be addressed in this study. Longer-term goals for the project included a focus on teaching and intervention, communication

between parents, teachers, and students, as well as more students mastering objectives. A continued study of the report cards and their effect on these longer-term goals must be completed in the years to follow along with ongoing study of the assessments and tools used in the process.

Implications for Practice

While the primary reason for this study was the refinement and growing of the standards-based grading process within a particular school, the lessons learned should be shared with others in the field beginning this process. This study found that the process could vary greatly with the experiences of others based on the current climate, procedures, and parent involvement of the school. However, a few overarching best practice suggestions found in this study should be shared.

- The process moves more smoothly if it can grow with a set of children. A school could begin with the lowest grade level giving letter grades and add a grade level each year. While it lengthens implementation timelines for older grade, it appeared to increase the level of success for this study.
- The actual reporting guidelines should be easily understood and not comparable to a letter grade. This study found that teachers and parents appreciated the stoplight colors of red, yellow, and green as opposed to a letter or number. The side product of an easily understood system is that students also understand the system and can communicate with parents and teachers about their learning using the same vocabulary.
- If moving a grade level at a time, the largest change comes with teachers, not parents. Leaders should devote much time to helping teachers develop the tools and assessments to fairly and accurately assess and monitor student learning. Leaders should spend time listening to what other successful schools are using as tools and give teachers time to

explore how they will record student learning along the way and what assessment measures they will use. Ideally, this is done before the actual implementation, but leaders who are already in the middle of this implementation can have hope. This process can be, and most likely will be, ongoing throughout use of the report card. While it is important to give parents the tools they need to be successful, this study found that parents who have experienced only this method of grading are accepting and understanding of the new format. This really means the focus should be on the educators new to the process.

- This needs to be a fluid and changeable document. Even in the one year involved in the study, a change in curriculum and local assessments necessitated minor changes to the document. The document should be easily modified. In conversation, some districts' grading documents are approved by the board of education. If this is the case, there needs to be a streamlined process for minor changes that may need to be made to the document itself.
- Assessments are a large part of this process, maybe even more so than the document itself. This means assessments should be discussed early in the process. The actual assessments used, especially those informal means of determining mastery, will grow and develop over time. However, teachers new to the process need some structured guidance and collaboration time to discuss the assessment process and how it should be used to determine student mastery. Most likely, this will be the largest need for professional development for a school moving forward in the process. Teachers will need to grapple with the different ways a student can demonstrate mastery. Where teachers may, in the past, have primarily utilized formal and summative assessment strategies to determine

mastery, there may need to be discussion about the benefits of informal or formative assessments embedded within lessons. This could be a major shift for teachers who desire a common assessment for all students that seems “fair.” This also must involve a conversation about the depth which a student must demonstrate mastery. For example, should students doing double-digit addition only have to work a given problem, or should they be required to use that knowledge to solve real-world problems. These conversations should be had a professional learning team with all teachers at that grade level and continue anytime a new teacher joins the team. There absolutely must be available time for teachers within the same subject or grade level to discuss assessments and mastery.

- Be sure to consider the needs of all students, current and future, when discussing a document. One parent commented on the survey that, while she understood the standards, they were not appropriate for her child. She was absolutely correct and adjustments are being made for those rare children whose curriculum is completely modified due to need. These types of considerations should be discussed before changes are necessary so teachers and administration can decide what modifications can be made to an individual child’s report card before it is discussed with parents.

Conclusion

This study found parents positively responded to the change and parents understood their child’s current performance levels. Teachers also positively responded to the change, but had a much larger change involved. This study was held during the first year of a change initiative. While the initial results are positive, this is a program that must be formally or informally evaluated each year to continue to make the modifications necessary for positive growth.

Because this was a true problem of practice, embedded in the school system, there were definite time frames and deadlines for the use of the information. This problem of practice, like most within an operating school, had a timeline. In order for changes to be made to the following year's report card, feedback needed to be collected by the end of the school year. This feedback and study led to several changes in the process and structure of the reporting system.

This year's professional learning community and professional development focus is centered on the assessments teachers utilize to determine mastery. This includes working in grade level teams to develop strong summative assessments to assess mastery at a point in which students could expect to have mastered the material. It also includes an understanding of formative and summative assessments and the appropriate times to use each. Teachers are working on developing common assessments that will be used with all students in order to help grading be as accurate as possible. Recording student learning was a challenge for teachers, so a new Google document was introduced to teachers that listed each standard on a sheet with student names. As teachers determine the formative and summative assessments they are using to determine mastery, they can enter it onto that shared document and use it as a technology-enhanced grade book or, if they prefer, print the page and use it as they would a traditional grade book. Due to changes in curriculum, the need for professional development surrounding differentiated instruction was moved to a later year, when teachers are more familiar with the new curriculum and appropriate professional development surrounding the new curriculum could be given.

The document itself had only minor modifications. We did address teacher concerns that some of the standards needed to be adjusted to other times during the year. Those changes were

made along with adjustments to the AimsWeb data section due to updated testing items. A change to the specials classes' standard (music, physical education, computers, library) was originally slated for this year, moving from a participation-oriented standard to content standards. However, after visiting with parents, it was decided to move that change to a later date or possibly eliminate the change. The structure of some of our students' report cards changed a little more dramatically when we began utilizing modified report cards for students working on off-grade level standards as part of an individualized plan.

Our communication plan remained fairly consistent. We again offered the second grade parent meeting that allowed the chance to receive the report card two days early and gave parents the chance to ask questions about the process or the actual documents. However, we did create another written document designed to assist parents in understanding the AimsWeb component of the report card.

The strength of this study, as well as some of its limitations, lies in the cross-over between leader and researcher. This combination led to some of the challenges and benefits from this study. As the leader, suggestions and improvements can be made quickly and in a sustainable way. While this created some barriers in an effort to maintain quality parent relationships throughout the process, it led to quality suggestions for improvements and a realistic timeline for making those a reality. Finally, this job of educator is vast and difficult. We must become better "in-the-field" researchers finding better ways to educate our students if we want to meet the growing challenges facing the education field. This "in-the-field" research study indicates quality grading practices have the ability to change and grow teachers and families if given the right strategies and implementation.

While the goal of this study was to address a current problem of practice within a school system, this study had a lasting impact on me as a leader. Beyond just the implications for the study, this crossover of researcher and leader created lasting changes in my practice. I became a shrewder user of research. In hunting for intervention materials, I now look past the posted results to the quality of research. As an outside organization made claims about a program we were implementing, I became better at understanding how they had manipulated the data to look a certain way. Beyond these data components, I have become a better user of research as well. However, the biggest change is in how I see my role as the instructional leader of the building. No longer do I only rely on research being created around me. I am now a creator of research and evidence. This happened because I now view myself as a researcher as well as a leader. I understand that I have a responsibility to my school to deeply understand a problem of practice in the building, use current literature to help frame my thinking about that problem of practice, develop or devise a way to learn more about it, and then reflect on what I learn to better address that problem within my building. This process gave me ownership and a responsibility to meet those problems of practice with a solution-oriented framework.

Current research still heavily relies on the researcher role. However, it is my hope that leaders will begin to work through this process, sharing the challenges that come with being both leader and researcher. Because problems of practice are embedded within real, live, operating schools, research that is reported on them may be muddied as well. However, schools and leaders can no longer afford to operate as silos in this large organization we call “education.” It will take leaders willing to act as researchers within their own context to build real solutions that work in real schools. Then, it takes being able to share that research with other leaders in the field, along with the challenges and solutions that made it work in today’s schools with today’s

students and teachers. That type of collaboration amongst researching leaders could create cataclysmic change in today's schools. I know this process certainly created lasting change in my leadership.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Did anyone attend the parent session held in October? If yes, what things were shared that were helpful to you?
2. Was there information that should have been shared at the initial meeting that was not?
3. What information in the brochure and parent letter did you find helpful?
4. What information was missing from written communication home?
5. What information on the report card do you find to be the most useful? Least useful?
6. What additional information or communication would be helpful?
7. What communication or information did you find the most helpful this year?
8. How well do you think you understand where your child's learning is at compared to where he or she should be?
9. How has this report card helped you communicate with your child's teacher about specific things you can help your child with?
10. How could we make the report card better? Is there information that's not included that would be helpful?
11. How could we communicate about the report card more effectively? Are there things you would like to know more about?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Tell me a little about ways you've reported student learning in the past.
2. What have you liked about standards-based grading?
3. What challenges have come up with standards-based grading?
4. How has this new report card changed the way you communicate with parents?
5. What were some of the concerns parents had when they met with you?
6. How have you used this report card and reporting process to communicate with students about their learning?
7. How has your instruction, differentiation, or remediation changed with this new style of tracking student learning?
8. Are there tools that need added, changed, or modified to make the process more effective or more convenient?
9. Is there any type of professional development, training, or collaboration that would make this more successful?
10. What changes would you make on the report card itself or the method of distribution?
11. What was the most helpful part of the process so far?
12. What one thing about standards-based grading do you absolutely not want to change?
13. What's the biggest concern you have at this time about standards-based grading?
14. How could we communicate more effectively with each other about the report card?
With parents?
15. How could we change the processes, procedures, or the actual report card to make it more effective or more efficient?

Appendix C
2nd Grade Parent Survey

I do not wish to participate.

1. Did you attend the parent meeting at the Highland library in October where information on the new report card was held?

Yes

No

If yes, how would you rate the information related to the new report card that was provided at the meeting?

Very informative

Informative, but I wish they would have discussed:

_____.

Not very informative, they needed to talk to me about:

_____.

2. Do you believe the new report card gives you information to discuss with your child?

Yes

Mostly, but it would help if it included: _____

_____.

No, I need it to include: _____

_____.

3. Do you believe the new report card gives you information to discuss with your child's teacher?

- Yes
- Mostly, but it would help if it included: _____
_____.
- No, I need it to include: _____
_____.

4. Would you be interested in receiving information about how to read the new report cards or help your child with things on the report cards in any of the following ways?

- Information on the website
- Short video clips on the website
- A parent meeting at school
- Written communication – brochures, newsletters, etc.
- Other (Please describe):

5. How user-friendly is the new report card?

- I understand it.
- I understand it, but it would be helpful if you would: _____
_____.
- I find these parts difficult to understand: _____
_____.

6. Other Comments: