

Why Do We Continue To Do Unto Others As Was Done Unto Us?

The Moral Imperative to Change Grading and Assessment Practices to Benefit All

As educators, we are currently swimming in a sea of change. The landscape changes so often that we find ourselves having to pause and take a good look around us just to get our bearings. In light of this reality, it is difficult for many of us to consider changing one of the longest-running practices in our education system- how we grade and assess our students. We are great at coming up with many excuses not to consider this paradigm shift, but the truth is that we cannot afford to procrastinate in addressing this significant educational practice any longer.

Thirty years of educational research and practice by Rick Stiggins, Jan Chappuis, Steve Chappuis, Ken O'Connor and Robert Marzano all point to the impact that changing how we grade and assess students has a positive impact on student achievement, which is great to know. What is even greater is witnessing firsthand in student after student, how standards-based grading and a balanced assessment approach has totally changed their educational trajectory.

Dansville Schools began the journey towards changing our grading and assessment practices six years ago. We have approached this with a teacher-by-teacher methodology that has resulted in many of our staff K-12 making this very significant change. We provided the research to all interested staff members, teachers did action-research in their classrooms in a supportive environment and those who have made the change testify regularly that they would never go back to the old ways of grading and assessment.

We started by creating clear learning targets that are aligned to the Common Core Standards. Clear learning targets are much more than the learning objectives or essential questions I used to put on the board in my classroom. Everything the teacher teaches must be explicitly tied to the learning target. No more busy work!

From there, we had to make sure we had common assessments among teachers who teach common courses or at a grade level. The assessments need to be explicitly labeled with the clear learning targets so there are no more secrets about what students need to know to be proficient.

To make sure the shift of responsibility for learning landed where it belongs- with the student, we started having students self-assess and track their progress. Students monitor their progress on the clear learning targets throughout a unit by tracking their proficiency on their formative assessments and by seeing the descriptive feedback their teacher provides on some of these assessments. Students love to visually see their growth on graphs and charts- even high school students!

We provided training and continue to provide professional opportunities for staff regarding a balanced assessment system. We realized that we needed a common language and understanding for assessment as it relates to formative and summative assessments, when to use each and how to use them. We also had to teach our students this information to maximize the effectiveness of our assessment system.

We were finally ready to tackle our grading system- extra credit, late work, zeros, missing work, retakes, and the weighting of summative vs. formative in a grade. We are still working on this, but in general, students are graded based on their summative assessments (90%) and their work habits (10%). We have shifted to a focus on proficiency for ALL students. Students are allowed to retake the learning targets they missed on summative assessments. This change alone has brought many reluctant learners back to the table.

Instead of grades, in many cases we are using a 0-4 scale with rubrics. Students use the rubrics for their self-assessments as well as to track their progress based on teacher feedback. Teachers are backing their learning targets with rubrics to make sure the target is crystal clear for all stakeholders.

This is a journey that has been extremely challenging, but also unbelievably rewarding~ for teachers and students alike. We have stories of students who transferred into our high school without hope and behind in credits who started experiencing success, which soon became confidence, which eventually led to a high school diploma. We would never purport to be experts or to have established a perfect system, but we realize that because of the impact on students and the shift in our mission to produce students who are ALL proficient, we need to keep plugging along.

I will leave you with one of our favorite quotes throughout this process: “What we know today doesn’t make yesterday wrong; it only makes tomorrow better.” We had to put our teacher guilt about our former ways behind us. We’ve are beginning to experience a “better tomorrow” and believe that it’s time to stop doing unto our students as was done unto us in the areas of grading and assessment.

Please check out the work of the authors and researchers referenced in this article. You may also want to check out the Assessment tab on our website at: www.dansville.org for presentations and resources to help as you lead your staff on your own journey.

Written for MI Assessment Consortium’s “Reflective Assessor” webpage September 2012 Amy Hodgson, Superintendent Dansville Public Schools