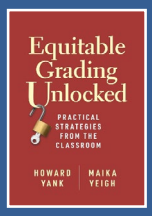
Michigan Assessment Consortium

Learning Point

Making grading visible: From classroom rubrics to schoolwide change

Ask a student why they received the grade they got, and you'll often hear some version of "I don't know." That gap between competency and outcome — between what a student *knows and can do* and what a grade says — is one of the quiet, corrosive forces in American classrooms. It teaches kids that success is something *that happens to them*, decided by criteria they can't quite see, rather than something they can *actively shape* — understanding it, aiming for it, and eventually judging it for themselves. Closing that gap is less about finding a better grading formula and more about a shift in who assessment belongs to.



This Learning Point draws on ideas explored in Howard Yank and Maika Yeigh's book *Equitable Grading Unlocked* (ASCD, 2026) and their Edutopia article, "Establishing Consistent Standards-Based Grading Throughout Your School."

Turning assessment into something students do, not just something done to them

Rubrics are one of the most direct tools we have for making learning targets visible. Done well, they translate vague expectations — "good analysis," "well organized," "quality work" — into plain-language descriptions of what different levels of performance actually look like. That alone is a meaningful shift: instead of students reverse-engineering what a teacher wants, they can see it laid out in front of them before they start. And it's not only what the teacher wants — it's the standard of success itself, but the same for every student also taking this assessment.

But a rubric sitting in a folder or posted on a syllabus doesn't do much on its own. Its real power shows up when students actually use it — not just to find out how they did, but to figure out, mid-process, where they stand and what to do next. That might mean a student checking a rubric against a rough draft before turning it in, marking up their own quiz to identify which specific skills to review, or sitting with a partner to talk through why one lab report is stronger than another. Teachers can provide structured time to model this with students and to practice each method. Each of these moves the rubric from an evaluation tool into a learning tool — and moves the student from someone being assessed into someone doing the assessing, allowing each student to take control of their own learning.

This kind of self- and peer assessment asks more of students than to passively wait for a grade. They have to compare their own work honestly against a standard, name the gap, and decide what to do about it. That's a real cognitive lift, and it's exactly the kind of practice that builds the habits — reflection, goal-setting, self-monitoring — that outlast any single assignment. And that shows up again in every path a student eventually takes, in school or beyond it.

Tracking tools can extend learning further: when students, rather than only teachers, keep a running record of their own progress toward a set of standards, they start to see their growth as a story they're authoring rather than a judgment being handed down.

This information is aligned with the Assessment Literacy Standards at michiganassessmentconsortium.org

> [The payoff of visible grading] is a classroom where assessment stops being something that happens *to* students in private and becomes something they're equipped to do *with* their teacher, and increasingly, for themselves.

None of this requires abandoning rigor; if anything, it demands more precision from teachers up front, clearer standards, and more carefully worded criteria. But the payoff is a classroom where assessment stops being something that happens *to* students in private and becomes something they're equipped to do *with* their teacher, and increasingly, for themselves.

Why rubrics work best when a whole school speaks the same language

Here's the catch: a rubric that clarifies expectations in one classroom can just as easily muddy them across a hallway. Or if a "4" means something different in 1st period than it does in 5th, or if one teacher's retake/redo policy directly contradicts another's late-work policy, students notice — and so do families. What reads as fairness within a single classroom can start to look like inconsistency, or even favoritism, at the level of a whole school. That's often the moment a well-intentioned grading shift runs into real resistance from colleagues who feel blindsided by comparisons to which they never agreed.

The fix isn't a top-down mandate — schoolwide grading reform rarely survives being handed down from an administrator's memo. It tends to take root instead when it grows out of structures that already exist: department meetings, professional learning communities, and grade-level teams. These groups don't need an entirely new initiative grafted onto their work. They need permission to spend some of their existing collaborative time on a short list of concrete, shared questions: What are the essential standards for this course? What does a common rubric for our most-used assignment types actually look like? How do we calibrate our scoring so a "proficient" evidence of learning means roughly the same thing no matter whose classroom a student is in?

The most sustainable version of this work divides the labor rather than asking every teacher to redesign their whole practice alone. One small group might identify essential standards for a course sequence; another might draft shared rubric language; another might tackle logistics like a common retake policy or a rotating schedule for reassessment support. Spreading the work this way turns grading reform from a lonely project for a few early adopters into a collective effort colleagues can plug into at whatever level they're ready for — sharing what they try, calibrating their evaluations, and gradually building agreements that hold across classrooms.

None of this displaces the role of school leaders. Teacher-driven change still depends on administrators who protect collaborative time, invest in professional learning, and back the effort publicly with staff, students, and families. The combination — teachers shaping the vision because they're closest to the work, administrators sustaining the conditions that let it continue — tends to outlast reforms that come from either direction alone.

Bringing it together

Rubrics make learning visible to a single student in a single classroom. Schoolwide agreements make that visibility mean the same thing everywhere a student goes. Neither is sufficient by itself — a beautifully designed rubric is most powerful when it is similar to the one used next door, and a schoolwide policy is empty if it isn't translated into tools students actually use. Together, they move a school toward a simple but demanding goal: grades that students can explain, trust, and eventually help produce.

TO LEARN MORE

Learning Point: What do we mean by equitable grading?
qr.link/RD4BIw

Learning Point: Grading for learning: Guidelines for supporting student success
qr.codes/kB3ZCV

The Michigan Assessment Consortium is a professional association of educators who believe quality education depends on accurate, balanced, and meaningful assessment. MAC's Learning Points help increase the assessment literacy of all education stakeholders.

MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org