

Learning versus Grading

By Dr. Joyce Edwards, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning



Few can disagree that the purpose of school is for students to learn. It is widely agreed that what students learn from Pre-K through Grade 12 should be designed and implemented so that students will meet with success when they leave Franklin High School for colleges, careers, the military, a gap year, etc. This belief is contained within the district's recent work on the Portrait of a Graduate, recognizing that it takes an entire school district, families, and the community to ensure this outcome for each student. The logical question that follows is: How do we know if our students are experiencing success in our schools?

We typically think of student grades as a measure of student success. But, what about the learning? Do our grades accurately measure the learning that has occurred? In Franklin, we are engaged in a review of our grading practices for grades 6-12 in order to ensure that grades are fairly and consistently developed, are communicated effectively, accurately reflect student mastery of content, and serve as the foundation for reflective thinking by the student. The Grading Reform Committee is made up of teachers, middle school and high school administrators, and central office administrators and was formed as the result of identified inconsistencies in desired grading practices across the middle schools and the high school. The goal of the committee is to achieve greater levels of both clarity and increased communication about student grades for students, teachers, administrators, families, and the wider community including colleges. In fact, some of the committee's work will involve reaching out to colleges to which our students frequently apply as a way to ensure that our work is fully aligned with the expectations of higher education. As always, this goal must be achieved using research-based practices in the field that have proven productive.

One important discussion that we have had in our schools and within the committee is the idea that students work to achieve grades rather than working to achieve content mastery. They play the "game" of school very well and this is often reflected in their grades. Typically, our students know exactly what they need to do to get the desired grade. However, what we also know is that as students progress from unit to unit or grade to grade, they often have not retained the required knowledge and skills. This indicates that cramming for tests has not yielded true retention and therefore, we must rethink some of what we are doing and how we do it. Rather than grades being the driver of all things in school, we want learning to be the driver. That said,

we are very proud of the work that our students do and want to make sure that we accurately capture their true mastery of the content in our grading systems.

One of the challenges in changing grading systems is our own embedded belief systems. Educators, like parents, often come to education ready to “do school” the way that school was once done to them. Grades on a report card are only a snapshot of a moment in time and it is only when we have an entire collage that we can begin to truly understand the scope and depth of student understanding, skill, and knowledge. In today’s world, we need to rethink practices that go back well over 100 years and ask the hard questions. Does this grade represent my student’s best and most current work? Does this grade represent academic mastery that is solid enough to be retained and not the result of a one-night cram session? Does this grade reflect the student’s



progress toward mastery in line with the academic expectations of the school and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks? These are hard questions and as a result, the discussions by the committee are rich and complex. I look forward to keeping the community updated as we continue through this work during the next couple of years.