

# Assessing Students, Not Standards



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Begin With What Matters Most

Lee Ann Jung

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# CONTENTS



About the Author	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
<b>PART I ● PURPOSE AND CULTURE</b>	
A BIGGER PURPOSE	9
A CULTURE OF GROWTH	23
<b>PART II ● PRIORITIES</b>	
BROAD TRANSFER GOALS	45
CONTENT GOALS	71
<b>PART III ● ASSESSMENT PRACTICES</b>	
MANY WAYS TO SHOW LEARNING	95
WITH THEM, NOT TO THEM	119
RUBRIC RENOVATION	145
<b>PART IV ● GRADING PRACTICES</b>	
HOW NOT TO GRADE	171
BETTER PROGRESS REPORTS (AKA REPORT CARDS)	189
BETTER TRANSCRIPTS	215
LEADING WITH COURAGE	231
References	259
Index	265



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Lee Ann Jung, PhD**, is founder of Lead Inclusion, clinical professor at San Diego State University, and a consultant to schools worldwide. A former special education teacher and administrator, Lee Ann now spends her time in schools, working shoulder-to-shoulder with teams in their efforts to improve systems and practice. She has consulted with schools in more than 30 countries and throughout the United States in the

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Bring Lee Ann Jung to your school or district! Learn more at [LeadInclusion.org](http://LeadInclusion.org)





# INTRODUCTION

Since we were in third grade, we've all known that how our teachers graded our learning was problematic. We were told by teachers and parents alike that we got what we "earned." Weren't those scary words sometimes? Back then, we didn't have any idea of what grades meant for credits, GPAs, college admission, or for any future success. And, really, how much *did* the grades we got when we were 8 years old matter to our future success? At that age, we weren't trying to earn our way to success—what we were trying to earn from our teachers and our families was their *approval*. We wanted to know they valued us, and by all indications, grades were a way to get there. That's why the pressure around grades was scary. That doesn't sit well, does it?

Throughout our time in school, we were told that if we tried hard, we would learn what we were supposed to know, and then we would have high grades. But that wasn't entirely true, was it? Our grades were *only sometimes* fair and didn't *always* show what we'd learned. Have you ever understood something really well but didn't show it so well on a test or paper? Of course. Have you ever guessed well on a multiple-choice test and scored higher than you should have? Yep. And if you're a good test-taker, you had that happen more often than you'll admit. The rest of us were jealous.

Just this morning, I walked into the kitchen, my daughter at the spot where she works. Her eyes were closed, her brow furrowed, and her fingertips pressed firmly into her forehead. "Mom, I understand this all perfectly, but I just don't know what she wants with this proposal. The directions don't make sense, and no one understands what she wants." And we've all been there, having to spend more effort on figuring out how to give the right product than we get to spend on the actual learning.

As students, our report card grades also fluctuated based on whether the teacher was a “hard grader,” whether we memorized the right thing for the test, whether we remembered to turn in homework, and whether or not we could get high enough grades to “pull up” earlier grades. That’s a lot of “whethers” that aren’t the same thing as learning. Some of you had a sophisticated understanding of concepts but needed to be more skilled at memorizing facts. Some of you had memorization skills rivaling a blackjack card counter, but you crammed for tests and held onto what you needed *just* long enough to get through it. Grades also depended on how we were asked to show our learning. Did you do better with tests? Presenting? Writing? This showed in your grades.

The numbers on our papers filtered through all of these contingencies before they were distilled into ink as a letter onto our *permanent records*. I remember being told my *permanent record* would follow me throughout life—maybe to the nursing home. The adults all kept tight lips about the fact that the transcript didn’t have a “look back period” before ninth grade. What?! I was stunned and then liberated when I realized this meant my fourth-grade social studies grade from Mrs. Arrington wasn’t going to keep me from getting a job when I was 40. Now I realize this fear I was given about the *permanent record* was another part of the adults’ conspiracy to make sure we worked for high grades as 8-year-olds. The intentions were kind, but attempting to motivate through fear is anything but.

Fifteen years later, I found myself as an educator, grading in the same way with my own college students. Sure, I had rubrics to ensure fairness, allowed students to revise work, and gave lots of feedback, but for the first few years, I still used points, percentages, and averages. Unless you’re relatively new to teaching, you weren’t taught about mastery- or standards-based grading in college. You probably weren’t taught about grading at all. Even some of your teacher preparation program professors likely inflicted the same grading stress and pain as you experienced in grade school. Maybe worse.

But times are finally changing. In recent years, rapidly increasing numbers of educators have started questioning assessment and grading practices. We’d been feeling uncomfortable about it all, knowing in our hearts that the ethics and effectiveness of how we graded were entirely out of sync with approaches in teaching we know are best for our students. We knew we had to do better. The number of teachers discontented by antiquated grading methods grew until a critical mass leaned in with urgency for change.

About 20 years ago, I, too, started to question grading practices as my children's report cards and progress notes came home. I couldn't make sense of them. Really—they told me almost nothing about my children's learning that I could use to help them. And so it started. I began to reflect on the integrity of my grading methods as a professor and the grading practices I was teaching my students, and I started searching for direction. As it turned out, an entire field of research and scholarship was devoted to classroom assessment, and those scholars had already been constructing what we now know as standards-based grading. Imagine that! It was interesting and disturbing that so many answers had not made their way into teacher preparation.

You've no doubt had your eye on standards-based grading as a practicing educator. You may be in a school that's charged full speed ahead and is well down the path of a culture of growth. Or perhaps you're the one trying to lead (drag?) your school along to see the possibilities of a better approach. You've probably, at the very least, heard some chatter around it, read a book or two, or seen a presentation about it. And as it's no doubt happened for many of you, I was so excited to have learned an improved way.

With the new knowledge, I was eager to figure out how to apply the principles of standards-based grading and generate solutions within my field of inclusive education. Both of my children have dyslexia, so my personal motivation was as driving as my academic curiosity. The classroom assessment scholars and consultants were on a mission to upend century-old grading traditions, and I wanted in. I joined the effort wholeheartedly to work with schools, conduct research, iterate methods of grading, co-design report cards, and—present. Lots of presenting. (More on those pep rallies later).

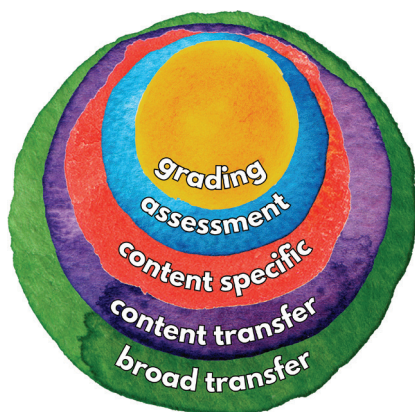
It was like watching popcorn kernels pop—one school, then a few more, then more than we all could count, each ready to sign up for grading reform. How exciting it was to be a part of the momentum of such meaningful change! We all knew that changes in assessment held promise to open doors for students and better inform teaching in every classroom. Some schools made complete revisions in grading scales and report cards and eliminated the worst offenses of practice (like giving zeros). So many beautiful successes! And there were also disastrous flops. *Epic* flops. Headlines in local newspapers, special sessions of school boards, angry Facebook groups, revolting parents, and rebelling teachers. Many building and curriculum leaders were forced to retreat and their enthusiasm bubbles deflated. But this failure some schools experienced was not only their doing. Those of us

working with schools were on the journey with them and held just as much responsibility.

Now, 20 years into this work, I've learned a great deal from the successes, hiccups, and flops. Most notable is this: With so much excitement focused on grading and report cards, there wasn't enough attention given to actual classroom *assessment*. I realize now that ***grading practices are a symptom of assessment practices***. Tylenol can reduce a fever, but that doesn't cure the illness.

A lot of Tylenol was given to schools in the form of grade books and report card changes. And that work is essential! But when we initiate assessment reform with our eyes focused squarely on grading instead of first engaging in the necessary, deep work of classroom assessment, we've treated the fever without treating the illness. There are a lot of report cards out there that have a 4-point grading scale, but behind some of those 4-point scales are percentage grades that have simply been converted. In other schools, 4-point scales are used on assignments, but there needs to be agreement or understanding of what those numbers and descriptions *really* mean. And there are a lot of other near misses like these. With the 4-point scale front and center on the report card, everything *appears* fine because it *looks* like standards-based grading, but beneath the surface, nothing has changed. Or at least not enough has changed. In some ways, this is worse than if the grading scale had never been replaced. At least then, the problems with assessment wouldn't be disguised. The order of assessment reform matters.

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT REFORM



As we move forward in this book and systematically deconstruct the tasks that lead to true assessment reform, a conceptual framework can help us organize the elements of our reform and give us a graphic organizer to visualize the order and relative importance of the components of change before us. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems model describes how systems affect one another. That the larger environment can affect the individual, and the individual can affect the larger environment. Bronfenbrenner wasn't talking about standards of curriculum, but his model is applicable. The concentric circles of transactional change are the basis for the conceptual framework of assessment reform. There are five categories nested within this framework: broad transfer goals, content transfer goals, content-specific goals, assessment practices, and grading practices. Our purpose for teaching is the context in which all five components are nested—this purpose is closely connected to the broadest goals we determine are most important. This book will move inward from the outermost context toward the final, innermost circle. It's only after moving through each of these steps that we're ready for a change in any report card. The reporting system should follow our shift in thinking around assessment.

The best learning experiences I've had have been with those schools that dared to completely reconstruct their assessment practices, but they've had the patience to do it in the correct order, with the right timing of steps, and with a well-thought-out plan. Hundreds of educators have given me the privilege to walk as a thought partner through this kind of innovation in their schools, and I've learned so many lessons. Lessons about the change process. Lessons about where and when to start this work. And lessons that have generated new thinking about assessment. This book is an account of the lessons learned. You've taught me that the grading part isn't first. Or even second. When we do grade, *how* we grade matters a great deal. And we will get to that in this book. But we need more than standards-based grading. We need an assessment of mastery and growth that cuts across subjects and domains and is all about fueling a lifetime of growth.

In our framework, the grading practices are the smallest, narrowest category in the conceptual model. This category is represented and is an essential component of the framework, but identifying and working on grading is what matters least and what comes last in this model of change. The largest context of purpose is where everything else must fit. We definitely don't want the minutia of grading to drive our purpose! The standards, curriculum, and assessment are in service to the purpose. Grading can't drive assessment. It's the other way around. The purpose is the starting point, and it has to start with and center on *what matters most*.





PART I

# PURPOSE AND CULTURE





# A BIGGER PURPOSE

*What matters most is bigger than academic standards*



Learning Intentions	Success Criteria
I'm learning about the evolution and principles behind standards-based grading (SBG) and its impact on student learning.	I can explain how grading practices have shifted over the past few decades and the reasons behind these changes.
	I can identify the primary objectives of SBG and how it differs from traditional grading methods.

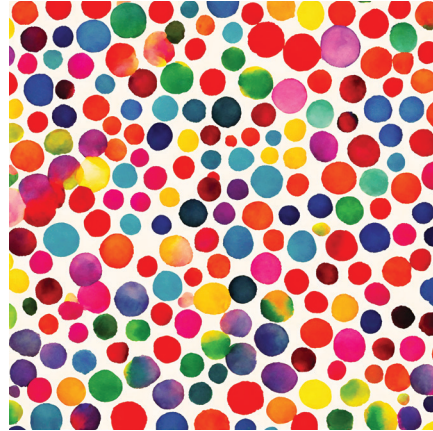
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Learning Intentions	Success Criteria
I'm learning about prioritizing specific standards and competencies in the grading reform process.	I can describe the process by which schools typically determine priority standards.
	I can evaluate the implications of starting grading reform based on broad transfer skills and its impact on classroom instruction and assessment.
I'm learning about the principles of mastery assessment and how it emphasizes growth and whole-child learning over standardized outcomes.	I can explain the differences between SBG and mastery assessment in the context of this book.
	I can articulate the significance of an approach to assessment that positions grading as a minimal component.

For those of us who were young before smartphones, social media, and Netflix, Saturday mornings were the best. Even though getting up on the weekdays felt impossible, on Saturdays we popped out of bed before our parents, poured our *own* cereal, and waited for the cartoons to begin. (I later figured out why Saturday independent cereal time was bliss for them, too.) After our parents slept in, probably until 7:30, they poured their coffee and opened the newspaper. For those of you who missed this time, our families consumed news primarily through the paper tossed onto our porches every day before daylight. They rustled, folded, and straightened pages as they sifted through the print. Toward the back of the Saturday paper were the hotly anticipated comic strips, or “the funny pages,” as we knew them. Calvin and Hobbes and Peanuts are all fond memories. And if you put your face *really* close to the comics, you’d see the individual dots that made up the image. But when you backed away, you saw those dots come together into something interesting—and funny!



In many ways, SBG can still look like the up-close version of the comic strip. We can be so zoomed into the dots, or the content standards, that we sometimes forget how it all comes together. We miss the “bigger picture” of the comic strip image—the broader context of learning—because of hyperfocus on the dots of content standards, sometimes to the near exclusion of many of the critical, most essential skills for life that should be *driving* assessment. Really, back away from everything you know about standards and think about the skills you use every day. The *thinking* skills you use in every environment.

Over the past few decades, practices in grading have gradually but dramatically shifted as schools sought a better way to communicate and a way to diminish the competition that grades breed. Schools have been feeling increased pressure to identify and prioritize what matters most to students’ learning, and they’ve joined the SBG wave. The collective body of work on standards, skills, and personalized learning has sparked positive changes in classrooms, where recall of content knowledge is no longer seen as the end itself but rather as what’s sometimes needed for higher-level understanding and application. SBG has served as a significant step forward in grading reform that’s focused on academic standards that are the highest priorities for our students to learn. SBG hasn’t been the panacea that’s made all of our assessment dreams and wishes come true. But the bumps in the road are not a reason to turn away from the excellent assessment and grading work that’s been underway. These bumps are why we need to keep pushing forward with a critical eye, visioning an ever better future for assessment—and education.

Schools often identify their “why” of assessment and grading reform as (1) communicating more accurately and effectively on how students perform on standards, (2) having better information to inform instruction, and (3) removing toxic practices that harm students. When a team in a school is tasked with selecting the standards or competencies to prioritize in revising a report card, they brace themselves for the long hours it will take. They sit at tables with all of the standards before them and begin poring over them in discussion to build consensus around the standards that matter most. The first step, logically, is stacking these standards into piles by subject area and determining priorities *for each subject area*. I know—this sounds great! And it can be, in fact, necessary—but not in the earliest stage in assessment reform, which is often where this happens. That’s later. Hours and days go into this process.

## TYPICAL GRADING REFORM

There are two ways schools commonly get through the process of identifying priority standards. Some begin the journey by identifying *specific content standards*. These schools take all of the curriculum standards and decide which ones are most important—hopefully, the transferable and enduring standards. From there, faculty are directed to report on these standards. Other schools implement a more flexible connection to standards and divide subjects into categories of skills, sometimes following the way curriculum documents, like standards of the Common Core, are divided. This process leads to dividing subjects into categories, for example, dividing language arts into “reading,” “writing,” and “speaking.” This category, or “strand,” method is dissimilar from the priority standards method, in that the category approach essentially eliminates the task of thinking about which curriculum standards matter more. With categories defined, the pro is that all standards fit somewhere in those broad categories. The con is that, in the reality I’ve seen over and over, there’s usually little guidance on the assessment that’s behind the scenes of the categories, leaving teachers to figure out which of the dozens of curriculum standards to include in any given assessment and the grade, and how to do so for each subject and each expression of learning. There is little reliability, or consistency, between teachers in how they assign grades. It looks great on paper, but it’s often just a concept.

Who knows why academic standards *for each subject* have been the typical starting point in grading reform? It could have happened when we focused on grading more than assessment. The cynical part of me

believes we started with subject-specific standards because legislators, not teachers and educational researchers, decided how the success of a school would be judged. Because schools are often rated on websites according to how well students perform on standardized tests, the tests morph into instruction and classroom assessment. Where does this standardized testing “illness” lead us? It leads to pressure to identify the academic standards within the subject area content that appear on the tests. Make no mistake: moving away from old-fashioned grading to grading that centers on standards is a “giant leap for humankind,” or it feels that way after so many decades of essentially no meaningful change. But even this shift to a standards-based practice hasn’t always gone well or led to real improvement in *assessment*, which matters far more than grading. Assessment reform in its entirety is the change schools need. Grading is just one piece of that reform, and grading improvement can’t lead to assessment reform—the order within reform matters.

Once academic standards are selected, schools then sometimes move on to think about students’ approaches to learning, which are known by several aliases, like “process grades,” “behaviors,” “21st-century skills,” and “soft skills.” Afterward, they then determine how to report on these. In actual implementation, though, sometimes these approaches to learning end up looking like the traditional “conduct grade” we all remember and love (unless it was a grade you feared). Schools seem to have a hard time moving away from the compliance grade. There’s still a tendency to include categories like responsibility, participation, and punctuality. In the end, schools identify and roll out the star academic standards and fold reporting practices into them, sometimes along with identified approaches to learning. Colleges and universities have responded to the shift as well. Grades and strength of the courses the student took are still the most important factors, but many students have high grades in college prep courses. College and university admissions offices increasingly value indicators of “student character” and look for evidence of this. SATs, ACTs, and IB/AP test scores are of little importance to almost all college and university admissions decisions (NACAC, 2023). Many are even “test-optional” now.

## BEGINNING WITH THE PURPOSE

In all of the professional literature on SBG, the recommended practice is to identify the purpose—the “why” we’re doing it—and design everything else with that end in mind (Black et al., 2004; Brookhart, 2015;

Chappuis et al., 2012). As such, identifying the most important standards or categories of standards can feel like the right place to begin. Consequently, there's a lot of attention devoted to exactly this and figuring out what shows up on the report card. If SBG were a screenplay, the script would read something like this:

#### ACT I Stop the Madness

1. Stop grading homework.
2. Don't use a calculator.
3. Quit with the participation grades.
4. Let students revise their work.
5. Zeros ruin lives.

#### Act II Do It Better

6. Choose the academic standards you want to prioritize.
7. Use a smaller scale (like 3-5 points or so).
8. Describe what those points on the scale mean.
9. Use that scale instead of what you were doing before.

## THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL

It's true; we do need to stop the toxic madness as quickly as possible. But before we move forward too far as a school into "Act II" of SBG and reporting, the purpose has to first take hold as our ethos. I'm not talking about the purpose of assessment. I'm talking about the purpose of *school*. In this reform, we should first begin by reflecting on the broad purpose and design assessment to follow that purpose. A student can get through a class with excellent grades, turning everything in on time, showing up to class each day, and participating in whatever ways the teacher defines, and *still* lack the ability to make connections of relevance, set their own goals, monitor and assess their own learning, advocate for their needs, and have a deep understanding of what works for their own learning. In other words, they can tick off all of the boxes of "mastering standards" and still be completely unprepared to direct their own learning. Clearly, our purpose is bigger than this. Our responsibility is not to prepare students to play the game of school but for a lifetime of learning. Our assessment can't

be so exclusively focused on standards that we stop short of the most important skills in *life*. Students are counting on us to prepare them as expert learners.

Small, liberal arts colleges largely identify their core, their *purpose*, as giving a wide base of learning from which there are endless possibilities for further study. General studies requirements are broad-reaching, and space for electives in the programs is generous, allowing students to follow their curiosities and interests. Many of these colleges allow students to create their own majors. Graduates of liberal arts colleges go on to be employed or enter graduate school, despite a lack of technical training for a particular job. They have success with their degrees because they've learned to be thinkers—how to become wise, expert learners. The time students spend in school and in college has a purpose that's much bigger than amassing credits based on how we've pieced and parceled academic curriculum.

There's a long list of pros and cons of a liberal arts degree versus a degree that prepares graduates for a specific, professional role. But there's no debating that, apart from career and technical programs and work studies, the purpose of K-12 education is to give students a wide base of learning that keeps all the doors open. Compulsory education's purpose is aligned with the purpose of a liberal arts education rather than a professional degree program. There are no majors in high school, for obvious reasons. What we do in school is support students' development as whole human beings, teach them to learn, and keep the options of the world as broad and accessible to them as possible, so they can dream big and have the self-efficacy to make their aspirations happen.

I'm not only talking about aspirations for students who have decided to attend a college or university. This focus on transferable skills and understanding is important for *every* student, including those who are going directly into a job or career and technical education. There are wonderful examples of career and technical education in high school. And some of the best examples (I'm looking at you, Vermont) use this education not as a lower level of the curriculum, but rather as interest-based options for all students. Students who have plans of going into the military first, or entering the workforce, or technical education, do not need lower-level courses. They need all courses to embed, as a clear priority, transferable skills and understandings. And our assessment (and grading) has to follow this purpose.

Success in most college majors doesn't depend at all on what you learned in specific subjects in high school but rather on learning to

learn and a base of skills that cut across the curriculum. No one over the age of 30, for example, studied social media for a career in school. Yet, millions of people are employed directly or tangentially in social media. There was no social media content preparation. But their experience in learning how to be self-directed and how to learn was incredible. Understanding that learning to learn is often more important than learning the actual content can be disappointing for the teacher whose passion is the content of Shakespearean literature and who enjoys teaching most of 10th-grade language arts via *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. But universities want students who know how to learn and to be intellectually agile. Increasingly, they want evidence of broadly transferable learning. More important than what universities want, this change in emphasis allows students opportunities to find their *own* passions and to develop skills and strengths by following their own interests and pathways within the curriculum.

There really is a hierarchy of priorities when we think about what will change students' lives, and within top priorities are much more than only content standards. Looking far beyond the academic standards to the whole child, we see how a more holistic approach to assessment should look. This is the context in which both standards and grading belong, but only as pieces and not always the most significant pieces. Often there's recognition of the importance of learning behaviors, but the intense focus of the report card is on academic standards. Our students can and do grow in far-reaching ways, like learning to learn and becoming expert learners, and these skills are very often more important than the content standards in today's lesson. Choosing what will be on a new report card isn't the right place to begin.

## PUSHING THE ENVELOPE OF SBG

I'll use the term *mastery assessment* in this book, but not as a new term for SBG. Instead, I'm using the term because we want to widen our lens and see the larger context of whole-child learning goals and a comprehensive view of assessment. Mastery assessment invites us to find all kinds of priorities, including academic standards or categories of standards. And I don't mean we start with the academic standards and then add on. Rather, we start broad and work our way inward to the standards. *Assessment* in this book is comprehensive, recognizing that both formal and informal means are valid and grading only the smallest, least significant part. *Mastery* in this book involves defining specific stages of learning and knowing precisely where a student's growth lies. This viewpoint of mastery comes from 1970s psychology research



(Haring et al., 1978). No worries; this is as relevant today as it was then. The intent is to consider skills that extend far beyond academics. We'll get to measurement and grading relative to this toward the end of the book—where it should be. *Mastery assessment* in this book pushes the SBG envelope in three ways: (1) a focus on growth instead of a standard outcome, (2) developing experts in learning instead of content experts, and (3) grading as something to do as little as possible.

## GROWTH AS THE EXPECTATION

The growth philosophy behind what we'll consider in this book may be the most significant push on a standards-based practice as we know it. In mastery assessment, the fundamental goal is that every child *grows* as much as possible. Although we may need to report at the end of an academic year on where a child ended up relative to a standard, that isn't the focus of our classroom assessment—or our teaching practice. ***To the extent we have our eye on the same criterion, a single bar, for all students, we've ignored the edges.*** We've ignored the wonderful variation and “jagged learning profile” of students in our classrooms. Then we are forced into grading on modified standards and struggling to communicate where students are outside our often nebulously crafted scale. I used to suggest assessing and grading on modified standards, but I take it back—at least some of it.

Learning doesn't end at the same exact point for all students at the end of a particular grade level at the end of an academic year, which we've defined as June. *And it shouldn't.* That's not the way growth works. That's not how *humans* work! Schools aren't factories, and students are anything but “standard.” Having our classroom assessments always focused on whether a student is “beginning” or “approaching” a standard definition of success can harm the growth mindset and self-efficacy we all need. Guess who's harmed the most? The kids on the edges. We don't need classroom assessment for *most* students on *most* standards; we need a set of practices that support growth for all on a broad range of skills and understandings for life. Practices that expect mind-blowing growth and celebrate reaching for the stars. Shifting to a focus on measuring growth requires we stretch beyond current SBG practices and reimagine our rubrics and grading scales to fit this vision.

## LEARNING TO LEARN COMES FIRST

In addition to identifying standards for academic content, the SBG movement challenged us as educators to identify approaches, or processes, to learning for assessment. This was a groundbreaking move

away from focusing only on academic standards. But several implementation missteps happen in this process of selecting priorities for approaches to learning. Most notably, approaches to learning, or “process grades,” are often just another word for “compliance.” Homework completion, participation, punctuality, and similar factors are commonly the focus. We often don’t dig in enough and find the overarching transfer skills students need, which leads to a restricted view of the skills of learning.

If we take a moment to reflect on what really makes a difference in later life, surface behaviors like participation and punctuality are a low bar for lifelong success. We need to get to a deeper level of skills, like self-regulation, that are *responsible* for engagement and punctuality. Is responsibility important? Sure. But “responsibility” is often a code word for “do what we told you to do” (i.e., compliance). Does participation matter? Engagement does, but participation usually means “speaking up in class.” This new and improved version of a conduct grade is often still about *managing behavior* to follow the rules instead of *developing self-direction*. Being punctual and participating don’t always signal strong skills as an expert learner. But students who are self-directed, self-aware, engaged, and persistent in a goal are punctual and responsible because these are outcomes of skills in regulation and metacognition.

Life-changing skills extend far beyond content knowledge and a shallow view of responsibility but also guide students to set their own learning goals, assess their progress, and persist to see whether they achieve them (Efklides, 2011). *These* are self-direction skills; punctuality is not. Self-directed learners are motivated, confident, self-aware, curious, goal-directed, and “active promoters of their academic achievement” (Roebbers, 2017, p. 34; Zimmerman, 1989). Compliance isn’t at all about learning these skills or social-emotional skills. Compliance is only about behaving in expected ways. We can shoot higher and do better. These are compelling reasons that our assessment reform should *start* with something broader than academic standards. As such, the mastery assessment we will design isn’t exactly *standards-based*.

## GRADING AS THE SMALLEST SLICE OF ASSESSMENT

Any work on grading reform has to align with our expressed purpose for school, and we can meet most any defensible purpose of school just fine without grades—certainly without grading as much as we do. Most of our assessments can and *should* happen without assigning

scores or grades. Before we grade, we should ask whether we should even be grading. I don't mean in the general sense, although we could. I mean that for any given assessment, activity, or evidence of learning, we ask whether we need to grade it. Even if it's a final, cumulative, formal assessment. It's not that we should never summarize learning using a symbol. But just because we have a solid, 4-point scale that's attached to a standard and has words like "beginning," "approaching," "meeting," and "extending" for each level does *not* mean we have to use that scale to slap a score on everything we observe or that comes across our computer. Truth be told, those words that describe relative mastery of a standard often lack clarity for teachers and students. There's much work to define "approaching," for example, that's been neglected, leading to "imitation SBG."

Even the best standards-based scale still has categories, ordered from lowest to highest, usually attached to letters or numbers. Sure, it's a far better scale than traditional grades, but a standards-based scale isn't the life raft that keeps us from drowning in the toxic competition pool. And it doesn't matter what the symbol is. It can be numbers (probably the worst choice), letters, or your favorite four emojis. We're at risk of falling back into a competitive culture as soon as those symbols are on a scale and in order. Effective assessment requires a great deal of foundation work before simply changing a grading scale.



## PERSONAL REFLECTION

### *How Traditional Is Our Grading?*

Many schools have already gone down the path of SBG and have "stopped the bleeding." Of the steps above, which ones has your school taken? Has this created a culture of growth? What should be next?

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Mastery assessment centers on how we know where our students are, the dialogue we have with them around that, and how we promote and celebrate *growth* while de-emphasizing scores and grades on a daily basis. Grading is often required, but it holds little importance in guiding teaching and learning. Assessment has a lot to offer when centered on the most important areas for growth, but reducing information to a symbol, at times, can conflict with *why* we assess. We'll explore later in this book the emotional and even physical harm an overreliance on grades can cause. I hope the research we'll explore on those effects provokes dissonance in the current focus in schools on social-emotional learning. Working on report card change before extensive work on assessment is putting the cart before the horse. Going about assessment reform in this order causes big problems for implementation that are difficult to undo. We need to grade better, but we also need to grade less. A lot less.



## SUMMARY

Although moving to “not your granddad’s grading” is monumental and necessary, this is truly now a two-decades-old recommendation. We’ve learned so much through countless schools’ implementation, and there needs to be a deeper dig to define the goals, philosophy, and *assessment* practices that follow the priorities we’ve outlined. I’ve learned these lessons and others through my own successes and failures over the last 18 years and am confident we’re ready to think with a new vision for implementation. Although SBG has offered an important stepping stone, this approach has much room for improvement—for a “next generation” of assessment (and grading). Educators are ready to push forward in how we identify priorities with more holistic beginnings and the right questions that lead to better implementation of equitable and practical assessment.

Mastery assessment encompasses grading and includes academic standards but is rooted in a philosophy that grading is a distal piece of the broader purpose of teaching and a system of assessment. This “lens” of this type of classroom assessment considers the whole child and their growth in becoming a self-directed, expert learner. When we back away and think about the skills and understandings that matter most in life, they are transdisciplinary transfer goals—the learning that isolated silos of subjects can’t contain—and instead, blur the lines of subject disciplines. Students need critical thinking, metacognition, problem solving, communication, and collaboration as central to assessment, not as “add-ons.” Without starting with the whole child, we can get neck deep into grading practices and lose focus on assessment and much of what’s most important to learn.



## LEARNING CHECK

I can explain how grading practices have shifted over the past few decades and the reasons behind these changes.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I can identify the primary objectives of SBG and how it differs from traditional grading methods.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I can describe the process by which schools typically determine priority standards.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I can evaluate the implications of starting grading reform based on broad transfer skills and its impact on classroom instruction and assessment.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I can explain the differences between “standards-based grading” and “mastery assessment” in the context of this book.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I can articulate the significance of an approach to assessment that positions grading as a minimal component.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

