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## **Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading**

Wendi M. Love

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**Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading**

Wendi M. Love

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

**Abstract**

This paper examines the transformative impact of implementing Standards-Based Grading (SBG) on student learning and motivation. Through surveys and data analysis, this research evaluates stakeholder perceptions during SBG adoption, comparing its perceived benefits to traditional grading methods. The findings offer valuable insights for institutions seeking to enhance academic excellence and equity and foster a culture of continuous improvement. The plan emphasizes personalized feedback, competency-based progression, and a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, the study delves into the challenges of faculty adaptation, resistance to change, and the integration of SBG with existing practices, ensuring a successful induction process for teachers and greater teacher efficacy of standards-based grading implementation.

*Keywords:* standards-based grading, grading, assessment, change

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## **Introduction**

The issue of grading in high school education is complex and faces challenges that impact its effectiveness and fairness. With diverse perspectives among educators, administration, students, and parents, there is a lack of consensus on grading processes and procedures. Many schools are walking away from traditional grading and considering mastery or standards-based grading. While some variation in grading is necessary across subjects and age groups, the inconsistency in grading practices across schools in the United States reflects a lack of understanding and agreement on the purpose and benefits of grades for student learning outcomes. Often the grade is not a reflection of what the student knows but instead of how the student has pleased the teacher, earned extra credit, or behaved in the classroom. According to Knight (2019), critics often argue against the inclusion of nonacademic behaviors in academic grades when using them for rewards or punishments, as it is believed to undermine the validity of the grade and impede student learning.

To address these concerns, a popular solution is the implementation of standards-based grading (SBG) or mastery learning. These grading systems involve grading based on the proficiency of subject matter, separating academic grades from behavioral factors, and providing multiple opportunities for students to achieve proficiency. Standards-based grading is often considered by schools reevaluating their grading systems as traditional grading often is inconsistent and there is a lack of understanding and agreement on the purpose and benefits of grades for student learning outcomes.

## Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading

The traditional grading system at Marvelwood School fails to accurately assess student learning. According to many studies, traditional grades as a means for assessing students lacks uniformity or standardization, as secondary teachers consider a range of factors in determining grades (Pollio, 2015). Furthermore, traditional grading systems often prioritize assigning grades over providing detailed feedback to students. This lack of comprehensive feedback inhibits students' understanding of their mistakes and limits their ability to make meaningful progress. Another problem lies in the subjective nature of traditional grading, a system in which teacher biases and external circumstances can influence the fairness and objectivity of the assessment process, leading to inconsistent grading practices from all faculty members. Some students want “the easy teacher” and mastery-based grading can minimize this problem. Finally, the traditional systems can foster a compliance-driven approach to learning, where students prioritize earning high grades and pleasing the teacher rather than focusing on deep understanding and critical thinking. The limited representation of 21st-century skills beyond academic content knowledge is another concern as traditional grading may not adequately capture important competencies such as problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, and communication abilities. To address these problems, a shift towards more innovative and student-centered grading practices is necessary at schools such as Marvelwood School, where the traditional grading system has failed to accurately assess student learning. This school improvement plan is to identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance education quality and student outcomes.

Grading has long been a struggle at Marvelwood and at many high schools. In recent years there has been a call for grading consistency. Traditional grading, the A- F scale, has not changed in centuries and carries concerns for today’s learners. In a typical traditional grading system, the teacher has much power over student grades, often in categories of the teacher’s

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choosing. A traditional grade can include multiple components including formative and summative assessments, group work, homework, extra credit, class participation, and other teacher-chosen grading criteria. The newer emphasis on mastery learning emphasizes student capability. The purpose of implementing grading reform in a high school like Marvelwood is to enhance the overall educational experience and improve student outcomes. By undertaking grading reform, Marvelwood would aim to address the limitations and challenges associated with traditional grading systems and create a more equitable, accurate, and meaningful assessment of student learning. Implementing a grading system based on mastery would promote fairness and equity, more authentic learning, provide timely and appropriate feedback, and nurture career and college-ready students who are able to accept feedback and practice resiliency.

Research for this paper was drawn from the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, the WorldCat discovery tool through DeWitt Library, and Google Scholar. The articles selected for review were published within the past decade and were peer-reviewed.

Almost all articles were USA based, most with an emphasis on secondary schools.

There are multiple studies that speak volumes to the purpose and importance of why mastery or standards-based grading is a better choice for students.

Implementing standards-based or mastery grading with a focus on faculty engagement and development at The Marvelwood School can enhance the educational experience for both faculty and students and can improve academic outcomes. By reforming grading practices, educators can promote more equitable assessment practices, foster a deeper understanding of subject matter, remove the emotions from grading, and nurture students' growth and mastery in subjects while empowering teachers to effectively guide student learning.

## Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading

The belief is that by embracing a new grading system, The Marvelwood School can transform its assessment practices to align with the principles of equity, student-centered learning, and academic growth. This implementation recognizes the importance of clearly defined learning objectives, provides students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in those standards, and places a strong emphasis on students demonstrating proficiency in essential skills or knowledge before moving on to the next level or concept. This approach moves away from traditional grading methods that rely on a single letter grade or numerical score and that are more teacher driven to one that emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and the development of essential skills. The hope is that by adopting this new grading system, students will feel empowered to take ownership of their education, teachers can provide targeted feedback and support, and parents and stakeholders can confidently understand student progress. The implementation of a new grading system would reflect Marvelwood School's commitment to educational excellence and its dedication to preparing students for success in the world.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Benefits of Standards-based Grading**

Standards-based grading (SBG) is an educational approach that has gained significant attention in recent years. There is significant literature on the benefits associated with implementing SBG in educational settings. The various studies and scholarly articles explore the positive impacts of SBG on student learning, teacher practices, and overall educational outcomes. One of the primary benefits of SBG is its ability to provide clearer communication about student progress and achievement. Research suggests that the use of specific learning targets or standards allow for more precise assessment and feedback, enabling students, parents,



and teachers to have a better understanding of the areas in which students excel and areas that require improvement. Rather than using grades as a means of motivation, in an SBG system, standards function as a means of communication between students, their parents, and educators regarding the students' present comprehension and abilities (Wilcox 2022). Defining progress toward clear and understandable targets provides feedback to students and their parents that is crucial for supporting their learning journey. Moreover, the use of specific learning targets or standards in SBG allows for more accurate and targeted feedback. Teachers can assess students' understanding and skills based on the mastery of each standard, providing constructive feedback that is directly linked to desired learning outcomes. Standards-based grading affords teachers the ability to be clear with their grades; they do not have to go to great lengths to explain the grade as it is based on mastery. Guskey (2021) argues that establishing a transparent curriculum empowers teachers to precisely articulate the desired knowledge and skills students should acquire, subsequently sharing these expectations with both students and their families. In essence, the learning objectives become widely recognized and evident to all parties involved. Parents and families understand what students are expected to learn and comprehend, as well as the significance behind this knowledge acquisition(Guskey 2021). By providing students and their parents with clear and attainable learning goals, students can meet those expectations.

### **SBG Benefit to Parents**

SBG grading not only benefits learners but parents as well. In a study conducted by Knight and Cooper (2019), it was found that SBG (Standards-Based Grading) not only aided teachers in comprehending the specific needs of their students, thereby improving their capacity to design effective instruction, but also strengthened their ability to communicate those needs to various stakeholders. These stakeholders include future teachers, special education teachers,

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paraprofessionals, tutors, and parents. Instead of depending solely on traditional letter grades, teachers can develop a more profound comprehension of their students' progress by examining explicit learning objectives and the accompanying feedback. This insight can then be effectively communicated to fellow educators and parents. This transparency allows stakeholders to have informed discussions with the student and the teacher about their academic growth, leading to more meaningful support and involvement in their child's education.

Another reason that SBG offers clarity is the issue of teacher subjectivity in grading. Some teachers have never been formally trained on how to grade well. In a study by Olson and Buchman (2019) of 15 teachers, 14 shared they had never been formally trained on grading; reform was disregarded and overlooked, rendering it a predominantly unspoken, hidden, and individualistic occurrence. (Olson 2019). The study concluded that “grading as an educational topic is inherently unclear, (b) 13 of the 15 teachers’ preparation programs had not included systematic attention to grading practices and neither school had previously made grading a formal object of reflection, and (c) grading is inextricable from philosophical debates around purposes of education” (Olson 2019). In other words, teachers are not generally well equipped with how to grade. SBG offers teachers a more conducive and clearer way to communicate student achievement.

Educators should prioritize reliable grading and reporting practices to effectively communicate student progress. Many agree that traditional grading reports are considered ineffective in this regard. Adopting Standards-Based Grading (SBG) with specific learning targets or standards allows for precise assessment and feedback, enabling clearer communication about student achievement and areas for improvement. In an exploratory mixed methods study by Swan et. al., 2014, the aim was to understand teachers' and parents' perceptions of standards-

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based report cards compared to traditional report cards. The study involved surveying 24 volunteer teachers and parents of 3rd-6th graders at a school in a mid-sized district who piloted the standards-based grading report card. Surveys used a rating scale of “much less,” “less,” “more,” and “much more” to evaluate the report cards in terms of quantity, quality, clarity, and ease of understanding. The surveys were accompanied by an open-ended comments section for parents to provide additional feedback. The study showed that “participating teachers commented that standards-based reports provided more information and better-quality information that was clearer and easy to understand. They also reported that the standards-based reporting process was more time consuming, but that the value added was worth the additional time.” (Swan et al., 2014). The study also showed that “teachers and parents agree that the Standards-Based Grading report cards offer more information and better-quality information than the traditional report card.” Therefore, while time-consuming, both teachers and parents felt that SBG was beneficial to student learning and communicates better regarding what has been learned and needs improvement.

### **Stakeholders' Perspectives of Standards-based Grading**

There are many challenges that come with implementing SBG. It requires a deep and systematic change in how educators' grade, forcing them to question not only how they assess student work but how they teach. Much of the literature reviewed spoke to the challenges that the stakeholders had with reforming the grading system at their school.

Often teachers were the ones most resistant to removing the traditional grading system and using SBG. In 2016-2018 Olsen and Buchmann collected data in two New York high schools undergoing a year-long professional development program on rethinking grading. The year prior to this study, the school adopted a 1–4 grading scale, replacing the traditional 0%–

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100% scale they had been using. The schools hired a consulting agency, Elevate, which offered a professional development model that draws from action research, collaborative teacher learning, and teacher reflection. The researchers not only utilized existing literature on grading as a basis for their study but also employed institutional theory and teacher identity as conceptual frameworks. The findings revealed that productive teacher change occurred, albeit in a partial and tentative manner, with teachers heavily reliant on school-wide support, and not without frustration experienced by the teachers involved. Eleven of the 15 teachers' beliefs about grading moved over the course of the 10 months. (It should be noted that two of the teachers dropped out of the study within the first month.) Olsen and Buchmann's study showed initial teacher resistance to adopting Standards-Based Grading (SBG). However, with the introduction of a 1-4 grading scale and school-wide support from a consulting agency, productive, though partial, teacher change occurred over 10 months, despite the two dropouts. The study emphasizes the significance of support and acknowledges the challenges faced by teachers during the transition (Olsen & Bachmann 2019).

Bonner, Riviera, and Chen (2017) studied teachers and their perceptions, specifically the coherence and alignment of teachers' perspectives on standards-based instructional practices, classroom assessment, and external testing. Surveys were administered to 155 participants, and interviews were conducted with a sample of nine secondary school teachers in a large urban district in the USA. The findings revealed a moderate correlation between teachers' use of standards in instruction, their preferences for classroom assessment, and their beliefs regarding the test-driven system. The interview data provided valuable insights into the reasons behind teachers' beliefs and their compatibility with a cohesive assessment system. No significant relationship was found between participant gender, age, or years of teaching experience and the

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survey scales, as determined by descriptive analysis. The data indicated that the sample reported moderate usage of state standards in instructional practices and held neutral perceptions about the value of state standards-based tests. Participants slightly leaned towards preferring alternatives to test-based classroom assessment. By examining the relationships between different variables, some interesting patterns were found. Teachers who incorporated state standards grading into their classrooms tended to have more positive views of state tests, indicating a potential alignment between these two factors. Conversely, teachers who expressed a strong preference against test-based classroom assessment were less likely to hold positive beliefs about standards. However, it was not observed that any significant relationship existed between the use of state standards in teaching and preferences for classroom assessment. The data collected highlighted the lack of coherence between teachers' preferred practices and mandated policies, revealing inconsistencies in their beliefs and actions. Many teachers express concerns about the state standards and test-driven accountability system, as it often hinders their ability to support student learning and limits their professional autonomy. To achieve sustained improvement in instruction, it is crucial to establish a coherent system that values consensus, respects teachers' professional knowledge, and fosters their creativity and initiative. (Bonner et al., 2018)

### **Reasons for Schools' Shift to SBG**

More and more schools and states are pushing toward grading reform, moving away from traditional grading practices and towards Standards-Based Grading (SBG). The recognition of shortcomings in traditional grading systems and the realization that standards-based grading offers a remedy to these issues are the driving factors behind the widespread adoption of new grading systems by many schools. The establishment of standardized state-level educational

standards, coupled with the demand for curriculum alignment with these standards, has compelled schools to embrace alternative grading systems that more effectively fulfill this objective (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015; Welsh, et al., 2013). The literature reviewed proved that many schools have either recently implemented SBG or are intending to do so within the next few years.

In their exploratory descriptive study, Townsley, Buckmiller, and Cooper (2019) delved deeper into the growing trend of schools adopting standards-based grading. The researchers collected data through surveys administered to Iowa high school principals, aiming to gauge their plans for implementing standards-based grading in the future. The surveys consisted of three Likert-scale questions and one open-ended question, which were then analyzed thematically through coding. Out of the 100 responses received, the results revealed that a significant majority (79%) of principals expressed intentions to adopt standards-based grading within the next five years. This study's findings indicated that many school leaders are exploring alternative grading systems while questioning the efficacy of the traditional grading system in place.

A 2015 study was done to explore how recent standards-based education policies have transformed the goals and governance of English education. Brass analyzed the 1996 IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts and the 2010 Common Core State Standards in the United States to showcase a significant shift in policy networks, neoliberal ideologies, and the utilization of managerialism, performativity, and free markets as policy tools. Through this research, it is clear that a more critical and strategic approach towards standardization in English education policies are needed to shape the future of English teaching and teacher education. To trace this shift, Jory Brass conducted a comparative analysis of two significant standards projects in the USA: the 1996 IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts and the 2010

Common Core State Standards. By examining these two projects side by side, the study aimed to understand the changes that have taken place in the field of English education and the impact of standards-based policies on teaching and learning. The study demonstrates that secondary schools and universities are making a shift to standards-based education and that English teachers should be prepared for this change. (Brass 2015)

Another reason schools are choosing to implement SBG is to ensure equity for students. Link (2018) conducted a quantitative study to explore grading preferences among teachers and how these preferences impact their grading practices. The study surveyed elementary and secondary teachers from urban and suburban districts, with 2,996 usable responses out of 8,750 full-time teachers. The results revealed that secondary educators were more inclined to incorporate behavior factors into grading, including zeros, and showed less collaboration and consistency in grading compared to their elementary counterparts. Additionally, location played a role, as urban teachers favored subjective grading and rewarding effort, while secondary teachers who received non-traditional training, predominantly in urban districts, were more likely to include non-academic factors in grades. Link concluded that a higher proportion of non-traditionally trained teachers in urban secondary settings may negatively impact student achievement scores due to ineffective grading practices and penalties for negative behaviors rather than solely focusing on academic achievement. In conclusion, the implementation of standards-based grading (SBG) is motivated in part by promoting equity for students. The study emphasized the potential negative impact of ineffective and traditional grading practices.

### **Key Considerations and Practices**

It is vital for administrators to know the implementation process for reforming grading practices. While there is a plethora of scholarly advice for implementing standards-based

grading, there is a lack of studies on the standards-based implementation process. Knight and Cooper (2019) undertook a qualitative, phenomenological study involving seven high school teachers from five distinct schools, all of whom implemented standards-based grading practices in their classrooms. The analysis involved coding and examination of interview transcripts, researchers' observations, and relevant documents, utilizing the NVivo software program and the researchers' personal notes. The findings of their study revealed that among the participating teachers, only one reported behaviors separately from the academic grade, three allocated a small percentage to indicate specific behaviors, two did not include behavior reporting, and one incorporated 21st-century skills as part of the curriculum. (Knight and Cooper 2019) After conducting multiple rounds of coding and synthesizing shared perspectives among the teachers, several themes emerged. One highlighted the importance of receiving support during the implementation process of standards-based grading. It is suggested that administration needs to hear their teachers' concerns and hesitations and provide support, teacher collaboration, and time to work through the process. The study's themes also highlighted the significance of providing teachers with sufficient time for understanding standards-based grading, integrating it into their classrooms, and engaging in professional development specifically tailored to standards-based grading (Knight & Cooper, 2019).

A study by Waheed et al (2018) in Selangor, Malaysia was intended to explore the best practices of school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the community in selected transformed schools. They used in-depth interviews, observations, and document reviews to collect data. This qualitative multiple-case study investigated the optimal approaches employed in two selected transformed schools. The data were gathered from two school principals, six teachers with administrative duties, and 20 teachers. The study revealed a range of exemplary



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practices demonstrated by school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and the community. In both selected schools, four common themes emerged as best practices: adaptive and multi-dimensional leadership, fostering positive relationships, leveraging information and communication technology in school operations, and cultivating a culture of continuous professional development. School A stood out with its distinctive focus on the social, emotional, and ethical well-being of students, whereas School B exhibited a unique emphasis on extensive parental involvement and support. Another strategy used by the effective leaders in both schools was to understand the importance of “leading with the heart” rather than just managing people. One of the key practices observed in both case schools was the use of a "winning-the-heart" strategy to facilitate the transformation process. In School A, the leader emphasized the need to connect with teachers and staff, sharing a vision that resonated with them and being empathetic to the change. Similarly, the leader in School B highlighted the significance of winning the hearts of teachers, students, and all school staff, recognizing that their support is crucial for success. Both leaders demonstrated practices such as being friendly, listening to personal concerns, celebrating achievements, and fostering a sense of belonging, resulting in a strong emotional connection between the leaders and school members, a connection that ultimately created a team that shared a common goal. (Waheed, et al 2018)

Bonner et al (2018) investigated standards-based instruction, state tests, and assessment preferences among secondary teachers in an urban school district. The study was a mixed methods study that aimed to understand the impact of the district's state requirement for students to pass standardized state tests for graduation. The research involved surveying 155 teachers from grades 7-12, and interviews were conducted with 11 out of 27 teachers selected for personal interviews. The collected data was categorized into three clusters: (1) teachers who favored

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alternative testing methods over external testing, (2) teachers who supported external testing and aligned their instruction with state standards, and (3) teachers who neither supported external testing nor preferred alternative methods, with limited alignment to standards-based instruction. Among the surveyed teachers, the first cluster, comprising 33% of respondents, expressed a dislike for external testing and a preference for alternative testing methods. The second cluster, accounting for 39% of respondents, supported external testing and utilized state standards to shape their instruction. The final cluster, representing 28% of respondents, neither supported external testing nor preferred alternative testing methods, and exhibited limited alignment with standards-based instruction. This mixed methods study sheds light on the diverse perspectives of secondary teachers within an urban school district regarding standards-based instruction and their attitudes toward external testing. The findings revealed distinct clusters of teachers with varying preferences for testing methods and alignment with state standards. It highlights the complexity and nuances within the educational landscape when implementing SBG.

### **School Profile & Baseline**

The Marvelwood School is a small, rural, co-educational, college preparatory private boarding school located in Kent, Connecticut. The school is 90 minutes north of NYC and hosts both domestic and international students. The school has grades 9-12 and is intentionally small with no more than 120 students and 50 faculty and staff members. In the 2022-2023 school year, 112 students were enrolled. The students were 72% white, 14% Asian, 4% black, 6% Hispanic, and 4% multi-racial. There were 60% male, 35% female, and 5% non-binary. Over 50% are enrolled in the learning support program and students are offered a variety of high school courses, ranging from traditional courses to AP and college credit course offerings.

### **Student and Community Characteristics**

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The Marvelwood School is distinguished by the exceptional characteristics that shape its educational environment. At Marvelwood, academic excellence is at the forefront, with a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for higher education and equips them with the necessary skills for success. The school prides itself on providing individualized attention, facilitated by small class sizes and dedicated faculty who offer personalized instruction and guidance to help each student reach their full potential. Marvelwood also fosters an inclusive community, valuing diversity and promoting collaboration, teamwork, and mutual understanding among students, faculty, and staff. The school believes in holistic education, nurturing students' intellectual, social, emotional, and physical well-being through a wide range of extracurricular activities, arts programs, weekly community service opportunities, and athletic opportunities. Embracing a global perspective, Marvelwood offers international exchange programs, study abroad opportunities, and a diverse curriculum that explores global issues including being an active member in Round Square, a global network of schools focused on holistic education, stressing academics, character, leadership, and service. Marvelwood is known for its tight-knit community, where individuals forge deep connections; the school nurtures a positive and supportive atmosphere that fosters student growth and cultivates the leaders of tomorrow.

### **Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement at Marvelwood is highly valued and encouraged. As a boarding school, the school recognizes the significance of a strong partnership between parents and the school community. Maintaining open lines of communication is a crucial element of parental engagement at Marvelwood. Through regular updates, reports, and scheduled parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring, the school prioritizes keeping parents well-informed about their child's academic progress and overall well-being. Family Weekends are organized in the

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fall and spring, providing an opportunity for parents to visit the campus, meet with teachers, watch their student perform in sports competitions, and participate in student performances and activities. The Parent Association organization exists to involve parents in school events, fundraisers, and community-building initiatives.

At Marvelwood, parents are kept well-informed about their children's education through various channels. All students are given an advisor who acts as a liaison between school and family. There is also a Dean for Parents, who is another way to connect the school with families. Families also have access to the Remind app for messaging purposes, Orah—a student record management system, and Google Classroom, an educational platform, tools allowing parents to stay connected and up to date on their child's academic progress. Parents also have a parent portal on the Veracross system to see up-to-date grades and attendance records. To stay informed about school events and updates, parents can regularly visit the school website and follow the school's social media accounts. These platforms serve as valuable resources, providing information about upcoming events, important announcements, and activities taking place on campus.

Parents in Marvelwood play a crucial role in their children's education. When proper communication is established, parents become valuable resources. Since parent involvement, support, and collaboration with educators create a solid foundation for students' growth and success, their engagement is encouraged at Marvelwood School.

### **School Mission & Vision**

Marvelwood's mission is to “provide an individualized education that challenges students academically, encourages intellectual curiosity, fosters personal growth, and prepares them for college and the world beyond” (Marvelwood School). Marvelwood aims to create a supportive

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and inclusive community where students can thrive and develop a lifelong love of learning. The school emphasizes the development of character, leadership skills, and a sense of social responsibility. It also seeks to promote creative and critical thinking, collaboration, and cultural understanding among its students. The Marvelwood School cultivates an affirmative environment where students develop strong core values such as empathy, honesty, respect, responsibility, and a commitment to service. These values form the foundation of our institution, values deeply embedded since its inception.

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

At Marvelwood, standardized testing goals are not prioritized. Instead, the focus is on cultivating students who make a positive impact on the world around them. The school's objective is for Marvelwood students to become self-advocates who actively seek out challenges relevant to their college and future endeavors. Various programs and initiatives, such as IDEAS and CONNECTIONS, the Student Leadership Team, weekly Community Service, the Judicial Council with student representation, mindfulness classes, and customized elective courses are integral components of a Marvelwood education, aligning with its mission statement. In collaboration with their advisors, students are encouraged to establish personal goals, create an action plan, set academic targets, explore college and career options, engage in extracurricular activities, manage their time and assignments effectively, seek academic support when needed, and adequately prepare for tests like the ACT or SAT. Ultimately, all Marvelwood graduates are expected to be accepted into college and graduate as well-rounded individuals, embodying the qualities of a “portrait graduate.”

**Professional Development**

Marvelwood emphasizes self-driven professional development for its faculty, recognizing the importance of continuous growth and learning in the field of education. As part of this commitment, all new teachers are required to attend professional development sessions focused on the Orton-Gillingham program. This program, renowned for its evidence-based approach to teaching students with language-based learning differences, equips teachers with effective strategies and techniques to support diverse learners. By providing this specific training, Marvelwood School ensures that its educators are equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to meet the unique needs of students and create an inclusive learning environment. In addition to the mandatory training, Marvelwood encourages ongoing professional development opportunities for all faculty members, empowering them to stay updated with the latest research, instructional methodologies, and best practices in education. We host mini professional development series throughout the year given by in-house faculty or sourced through Education Connection, a consulting firm for both public and private schools in Connecticut. We ask faculty to attend what they feel is necessary for their growth and success, and these are always well attended as they are self-chosen. This self-driven approach to professional development gives power to its educators to continue their growth and success and reflects Marvelwood's dedication to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and delivering exceptional education to its students.

**Needs Assessment**

The transition from traditional grading to Standards-Based grading (SBG) at Marvelwood is driven by several needs. Firstly, traditional grading methods often incorporate non-academic factors such as behavior or effort, factors that can cloud the accurate assessment of student

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learning and achievement. SBG provides a more focused and transparent approach, where grades are based solely on students' mastery of specific learning standards. This shift ensures that grades truly reflect students' academic performance and provide a clearer understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement.

Additionally, SBG aligns with Marvelwood's mission and commitment to personalized and student-centered education. It recognizes that each student progresses at their own pace and has unique learning needs. By adopting SBG, The Marvelwood School can better tailor instruction and support to meet individual students' learning goals, fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. SBG allows educators to provide targeted feedback and interventions, helping students to better understand their learning progress and take ownership of their academic journey, aligning with the Marvelwood mission.

Another need for transitioning to SBG at Marvelwood is to enhance the college and career readiness of its students. As students progress to higher education or enter the workforce, they are increasingly assessed based on their mastery of specific skills and knowledge. SBG aligns with this shift by emphasizing the acquisition of essential competencies and ensuring that students are well-prepared for future academic and professional pursuits. By equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed beyond high school, SBG supports their long-term success and enhances their competitive edge. In addition, Standards-Based Grading (SBG) corresponds to the current educational trends in grading and assessment, and it is essential for a private institute to be aware of and aligned with these trends. Many schools and districts are transitioning to SBG as it provides a more precise and meaningful method to assess student achievement. By adopting SBG, Marvelwood School remains at the forefront of educational

innovation and ensures that its grading practices align with research-based principles and emerging standards in education.

For these reasons it is best to transition from traditional grading to SBG at Marvelwood School. The decision to pursue more accurate and transparent assessment of student learning is driven by the need for more accurate and transparent assessment of student learning, the desire to personalize education and meet individual learning needs, the goal of enhancing college and career readiness, the alignment with current and researched educational practices, and pursuit of the school's mission. By embracing SBG, Marvelwood can provide a more meaningful and equitable learning experience for its students, empowering them to thrive academically and prepare for future success.

#### **School Data & Analysis**

The data supporting the need to transition from traditional grading to Standards-Based grading (SBG) at Marvelwood reveals valuable insights into the areas of weakness and strength in the current grading system. Through analysis of student performance and academic records, the following observations can be made.

Marvelwood uses Veracross as its gradebook. The 2022-2023 school year was the first year that this program was implemented. This program, unlike our previous digital gradebook, allows the Academic Office to collect data and see teachers' grading in real time. This year we noticed more inconsistencies and have just begun to collect data to support our claim that SBG is needed at Marvelwood. It should be noted that there will be a parent survey and student survey distributed in the Winter of the 2023-2024 school year asking for more feedback before the complete implementation of SBG.

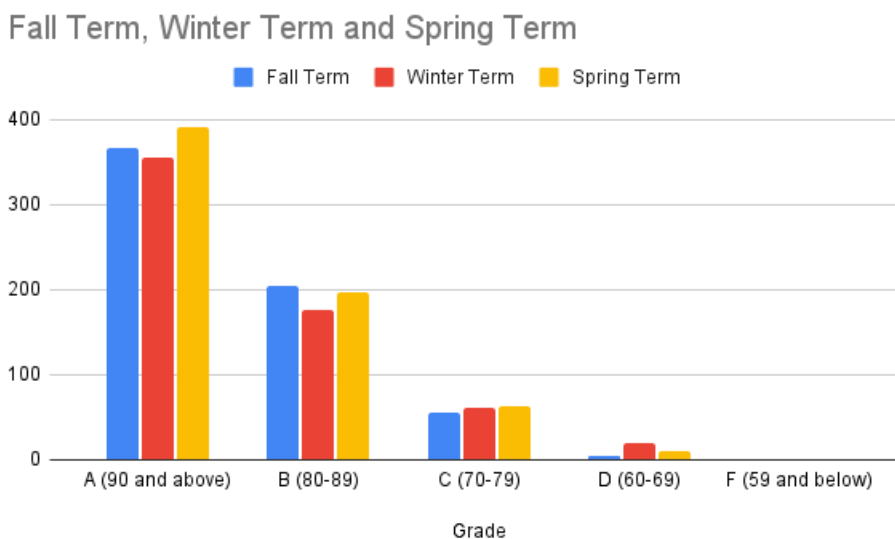


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The limited data indicated that a significant portion of students receive inconsistent grades across different subjects and assessments. There is a lack of clarity and transparency regarding how grades are determined, as non-academic factors often influence the final grade. Many students want to switch from one class to another because they want the “easier teacher.” Students are often left in confusion about their strengths and areas for improvement due to unclear grading criteria. Parents are often unsure of how their student earned their grade and often our teachers do not have enough data to support the questioned grade.

*Figure 1* shows the 2022-2023 distribution of grades. The new digital grading program, Veracross, has allowed us to see that we have an uneven distribution of A’s in comparison to our Cs. This observation could indicate potential grade inflation or deflation, variations in grading standards among instructors, or other factors that might be influencing the distribution of grades.

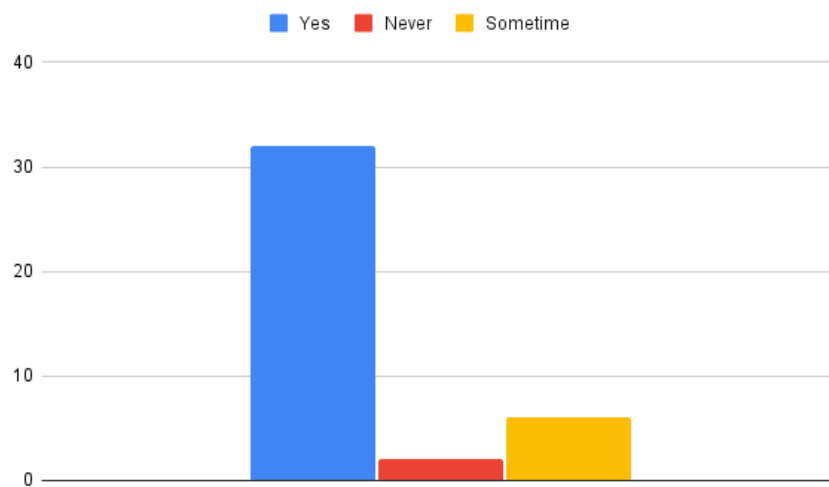
*Figure 1*



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*Figure 2* show the teacher survey this past spring. We discovered that more than half of our educators, 32/40 teachers, were using nonacademic factors to grade students.

*Figure 2*

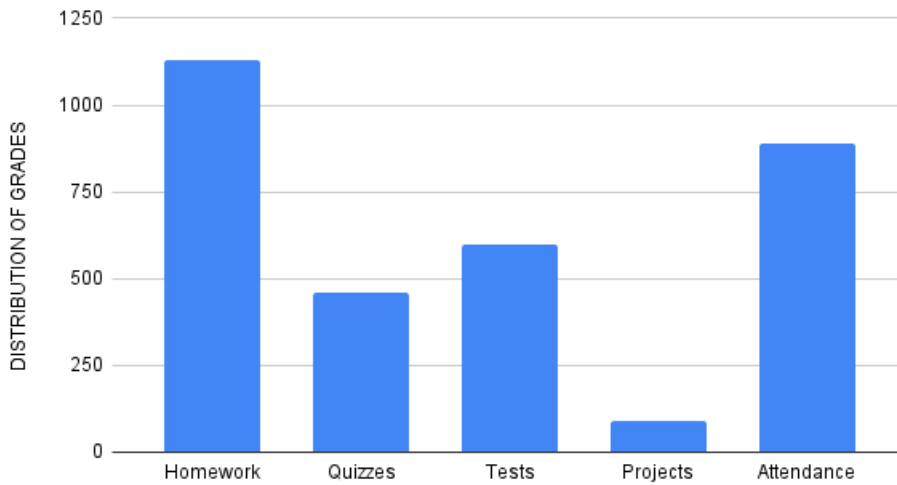


*Figure 3* shows the distribution of grades in the Winter Term. There were over 1000 grades given to the underclassman. This data shows that homework, participation, and attendance are heavily weighed just like an assessment and therefore Marvelwood is in need of improvement in distribution of grades.

*Figure 3*

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### DISTRIBUTION OF GRADES



The analysis reveals several areas of weakness in the current grading system: inconsistent grading practices, uneven distribution of As to Cs throughout all courses, teachers grading behaviors rather than mastery, and inconsistency in ways teachers give grades. It is evident that the Marvelwood school is hindered in gaining an accurate assessment of students' mastery of learning standards, while the inclusion of non-academic factors obscures the true academic performance and impedes their ability to measure progress. It should be noted that there are areas of strength where students consistently excel in specific subjects, and some teachers have successfully implemented formative assessments and feedback practices, but the school needs more consistency. To further assess the grading system, additional methods such as surveys, focus groups, and analysis of student work samples will be employed. As this reform is set for the 2024-2025 school year, a more comprehensive analysis will help provide a better transition to standards-based grading. Through this early analysis, it is evident that change is needed.

### **Action Plan**

The transition to standards-based learning can be a complex and challenging process. However, following the steps suggested by the literature can help the transition from traditional grading to standards-based grading (SBG) at Marvelwood. Leaders should also be aware of the challenges they are likely to face.

Throughout the literature, there were many challenges faced when transitioning to SBG. In many studies students expressed their concerns regarding various issues related to the implementation of standards-based grading. One significant concern raised by students and parents was the adequacy of their preparation for college and the workforce under the standards-based grading system. They felt that the focus on reassessment and performance-related stress hindered their ability to develop essential skills required for higher education and future careers. In a study conducted by Olsen and Buchanan (2019) where observations on teachers who implemented standards-based grading strategies were made. It was noticed that teachers often struggled to refine, adapt, or reverse their approach, ultimately undermining the intended purpose of the grading system. To address these challenges, Townsley and Buckmiller (2020) proposed three essential leadership lessons for the implementation of standards-based grading. These lessons emphasized the importance of considering the pace of implementation, engaging in careful communication with various stakeholders, and involving teachers in the change process. By adhering to these principles, Marvelwood can mitigate the negative consequences associated with standards-based grading and foster a more effective and supportive learning environment.

The following steps should be followed for Marvelwood to transition to standards-based grading.

#### **1. Form a Task Force**

The task force will include representatives from all levels of the school, including teachers, administrators, parents, and students. This task force will create a timeline for the transition. The timeline will be realistic and achievable and will be communicated to all stakeholders.

## **2. Create a Vision**

The vision should be shared with all stakeholders, and it should be used to guide the transition process. Knight and Cooper (2019) found that when stakeholders cannot articulate a clear "why" or purpose for SBG, the process is often seen as not worthwhile and can be eliminated. In contrast, when stakeholders have a clear vision for SBG, they are more likely to be committed to the process and see it through to completion. The study also found that a clear vision for SBG can lead to more purposeful instruction and assessment. When teachers know what students are expected to learn, they can design instruction that is more targeted and effective. They can also use assessment data to identify students who need additional support and to track student progress over time.

A clear vision for SBG can also help to align the work of teachers, administrators, students, and parents. When everyone is working towards the same goals, it is easier to make decisions and to ensure that resources are used effectively. A clear vision for SBG is essential for the successful implementation of this approach. By articulating a clear "why" for SBG, stakeholders can create a more purposeful and effective learning environment for all students.

## **3. Ensure Clear Communication**

There are multiple ways in which communication will be necessary as the school embarks on this transition. There must be clear communication with all stakeholders about why and how the school will transition from traditional to SBG. Clear communication must also exist

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in the grading and is in fact the purpose of transitioning to SBG. Accurate and consistent grading is essential for effective communication between teachers, students, and families. Inconsistent grades can lead to misunderstandings and frustration, therefore it can inhibit further learning as students may not be able to understand their progress or how to improve their performance, making the transition not worthwhile.

Teachers who used standards-based grading (SBG) reported that it had a positive impact on communication with students, parents, and other educators (Knight & Cooper, 2019). By focusing on standards, teachers were able to better understand what students knew and did not know. This focus helped them to plan more effective instruction and to provide more targeted feedback. SBG made it clear to students what they were expected to learn and how their progress would be measured. By implementing SBG students were able to be more self-directed and able to take ownership of their learning and be provided clear feedback for both students and parents. SBG has proved to help parents understand their child's learning and to provide support when needed. In addition to these benefits, teachers in this study also said that SBG helped them to communicate more effectively with other educators. They were able to share information about students' progress more easily and to collaborate more effectively to meet students' needs.

Marvelwood will need to be clear with its educators and families. There will need to be multiple discussions and professional development opportunities as well as clear emails and parent Zoom meetings to provide a forum for concerns.

### **Professional development for teachers**

The most notable suggestion from the literature is that professional development is necessary and should be consistently offered throughout the transition and beyond to help teachers understand the principles of standards-based grading and how to implement them in

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their classrooms. Resources should be made available. Also, it is noted that it is important to collect data on student progress so that the data can be used to track the progress of the transition and to adjust as needed and show how useful SBG can be.

Not only will teachers need to learn how to grade by standards, they will also need help adjusting everything about their teaching. Knight and Cooper (2019) note that the implementation of SBG requires a systemic change in teachers' planning, instruction, assessment, and classroom environment. To effectively implement standards-based grading, teachers must prioritize three key aspects: standards, clear feedback provision, and the establishment of a learning-centered environment. When planning instruction, teachers should concentrate on the standards, ensuring a thorough understanding of the learning objectives that students are expected to achieve. This understanding will enable teachers to design instruction that aligns with these standards, promoting effective learning outcomes. Additionally, teachers may need to undergo a process of relearning to create a learning-centered environment. This environment should foster a sense of safety for students, encouraging them to take risks and learn from their mistakes. It is essential for students to understand that their behavior does not directly impact their grades, thus creating a space where they can focus on their learning journey without fear of negative consequences. Marvelwood will implement professional development that focuses on these three aspects. High school administrators can support teachers in implementing standards-based grading (SBG) by addressing teachers' hesitations, developing schoolwide systems, creating grading expectations, and providing meaningful professional development opportunities. To address teachers' hesitations, administrators can provide information about SBG and create a supportive environment where teachers feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their concerns.

Olsen and Buchanen (2019) conducted observations on teachers who implemented standards-based grading strategies. They noticed that teachers often struggled to refine, adapt, or reverse their approach, ultimately undermining the intended purpose of the grading system. Therefore, more schoolwide systems will be needed and developed. Teacher leaders and administrators can provide teachers with common grading rubrics, training on how to use SBG, and opportunities to collaborate with other teachers who are also implementing SBG. To provide meaningful professional development opportunities, administrators can offer workshops, webinars, and other opportunities for teachers to learn about SBG and to get support from experienced practitioners. (Knight and Cooper 2019)

Buckmiller et al. (2020) found that rural principals in one midwestern state have standards-based grading as part of their five-year vision for their schools. However, they also face challenges such as lack of resources, strategic planning, faculty support, and leadership structures. Additionally, parent/community disapproval and teacher resistance are also barriers to implementation. This suggests the need for careful planning, on-going professional development, and frequent communication to foster stakeholder buy-in.

It is essential that Marvelwood administrators ensure that teachers are given time to learn, space to grow, and ample resources to be successful in implementing SBG so that students are able to benefit from this approach to grading.

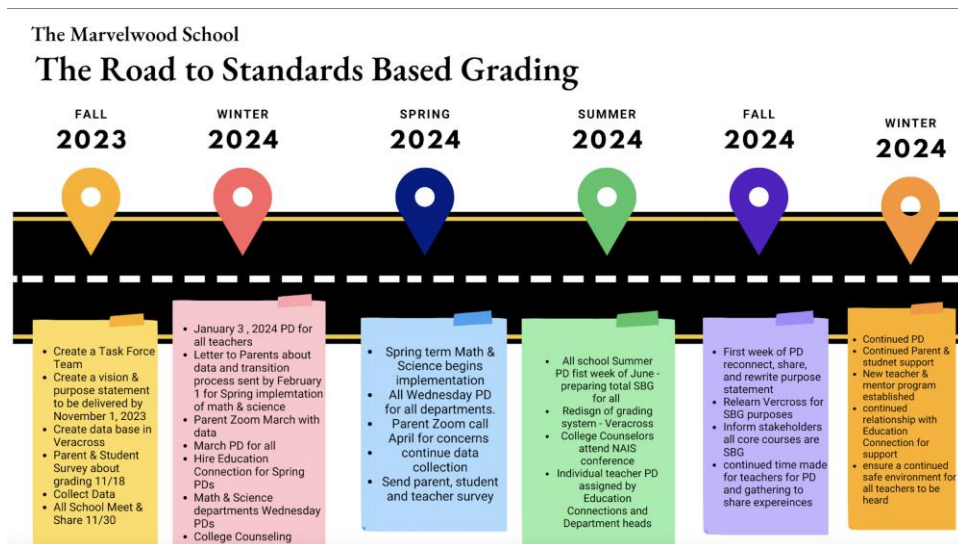
### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

The school will transition to a standards-based grading system over the next two years. The following phases will be implemented and *figure 4* will be shared with stakeholders as a visual for the framework for Marvelwood's transition.



## Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading

Figure 4:



### Phase 1: Planning and Preparation (Fall 2023)

#### September-December

- Communicate the upcoming changes to the faculty, staff, students, and parents, providing information on the benefits and rationale behind the shift. Ask for volunteers to serve on the committee.
- Establish a committee comprising teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists to lead the implementation process.
- Research and review best practices for Standards-Based grading and its alignment with the school's mission and educational goals. Work together to create a vision and purpose statement
- Develop a comprehensive plan for the integration of Standards-Based grading into the existing grading system working with administration and the Teaching & Learning Committee.

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- Organize professional development workshops for teachers to learn about standard-based grading principles and effective grading practices.
- Assign teachers to review and align their existing curriculum with the identified standards for each subject or grade level.
- Create a system in Veracross to track and record student progress according to the identified standards.

### **Phase 2: Partial Pilot Implementation and Data Collection (January-March)**

January-March:

- Hire Education Connection to help with transition and workshops
- Enlist Elizabeth Radday for one-on-one pilot teacher workshops
- Select two core courses (math and science) to pilot the standard-based grading system.
- Collaborate with pilot teachers to refine and adjust the implementation plan based on their feedback and experiences for implementation in Spring term.
- Train teachers, students, and parents involved in the pilot to ensure a smooth transition.
- Collect feedback from pilot teachers, students, and parents through surveys and focus groups to assess the concerns of the standard-based grading approach.
- Create ways to collect data on student performance and engagement during the pilot phase.
- Work with college counseling to ensure transition will be a success.
- Identify areas of success and potential challenges to inform adjustments for full implementation.

**Phase 3: Full Implementation for Pilot Implementation and Data Collection (April-June)**

April-June:

- Implement standard-based grading to math and science courses.
- Provide ongoing support and professional development opportunities for teachers to fine-tune their grading practices and assessment strategies.
- Monitor the implementation process and address any issues or concerns that arise.
- Analyze data on student performance and engagement during the pilot phase.
- Collect feedback from pilot teachers, students, and parents through surveys and focus groups to assess the effectiveness of the standard-based grading approach.
- Review feedback from teachers, students, and parents to make further improvements for the next academic year.

Phase 4: Full implementation of SBG for 2024-2025 school year

**Responsibilities**

The successful implementation of standard-based grading at Marvelwood will involve the collaboration and commitment of various stakeholders. The committee will take on the crucial responsibility of planning, coordinating, and overseeing the implementation process. Teachers play a large role in aligning the curriculum, implementing the new grading system, and offering valuable feedback on its effectiveness. Administrators will provide essential support, facilitating the process, offering necessary resources, giving time to learn and collaborate, and addressing any logistical challenges that may arise, including responding to concerned parents. Education Connection Consulting offers valuable assistance in curriculum alignment and shares expertise on best practices in standard-based grading while also providing one-on-one coaching, professional development, and state resources. The Academic Office will create the database to

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collect the grades and survey information. Students will be encouraged to embrace the changes, understand the new grading system, and actively engage in their own learning progress.

Meanwhile, parents will hopefully offer their continued support of their children's learning journey and stay informed about the changes and expectations associated with the standard-based grading system. Through this collective effort, The Marvelwood School ensures a smooth and effective transition to standard-based grading practices.

### **Resources Needed**

Marvelwood will need trustworthy resources to facilitate the successful implementation of standards-based grading to ensure a sound grasp of standard-based grading principles and best practices, the school will offer professional development workshops and training sessions conducted both in-house and through collaborative partnerships with Education Connection. These opportunities will enable faculty members to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for integration. Moreover, curriculum alignment tools and coaches from Education connection will be made readily available to aid teachers in aligning their instructional content with the identified standards, fostering consistency and coherence across grade levels and subject areas.

To facilitate effective assessment and progress tracking, the school will employ already in-place tools such as Veracross and Google Classroom. These platforms enable efficient and transparent recording of student performance, thereby empowering educators to gain meaningful insights into individual learning journeys. Additionally, by utilizing communication platforms, Marvelwood ensures engagement with parents and students. Regular updates and information will disseminate through these channels, enabling parents to remain actively involved in their child's education and foster a collaborative approach to student success. Through this resource-

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rich environment, Marvelwood will continue its commitment to cultivating an effective standard-based grading system that optimizes student learning and achievement.

**Helpful Resources:***Table 1: Literature*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Synopsis</b>
<i>Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms</i> by Joe Feldman	This book provides insights into how grading practices can be aligned with principles of equity and inclusion, offering practical strategies for implementing standards-based grading.
<i>On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting</i> by Thomas Guskey	The author challenges traditional grading practices and presents an argument for transitioning to standards-based grading as a means to improve student learning outcomes.
<i>Rethinking Grading: Meaningful Assessment for Standards-Based Learning</i> by Cathy Vatterott	This book delves into the foundations of standards-based grading and provides guidance on creating meaningful assessments that align with student learning objectives.
<i>A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades</i> by Ken O'Connor	This book explores common issues with traditional grading practices and offers practical solutions to transition to more effective grading methods, including standards-based grading.

*Table 2: Podcasts*

## Elevating Education: Adoption of Standards-based Grading

Title	Additional information
<i>The Cult of Pedagogy Podcast</i> Hosted by Jennifer Gonzalez	This podcast covers a wide range of educational topics, including discussions on grading, assessment, and standards-based practices.
<i>The EdSurge Podcast</i> Hosted by Jeff Young and other EdSurge reporters	This podcast explores innovative educational practices and features episodes that discuss standards-based grading and its impact on student learning.
<i>Leading Equity</i> Hosted by Sheldon L. Eakins	This podcast explores issues of equity and inclusion in education, often featuring discussions on grading practices that align with equity goals, such as standards-based grading.

**Monitoring Success or Failure**

At Marvelwood, the successful implementation of standard-based grading relies on a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating student performance, engagement, and most importantly teacher buy-in. Regular data collection will serve as a fundamental pillar in this process, encompassing continuous assessments of student progress according to the identified standards, as well as teacher, student, and parent concerns. Valuable insight will need to be gathered through ongoing feedback mechanisms, involving teachers, students, and parents through surveys and focus groups. These channels facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the system's efficacy and allow for adjustments based on stakeholders' perspectives. To gauge the impact of the standard-based grading system, thorough analysis of student outcomes, encompassing academic performance and growth over time, is undertaken. By employing these

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multifaceted evaluation strategies, Marvelwood will foster continuous improvement and ensure the efficacy of the standard-based grading implementation.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

Implementing a standard-based grading system at Marvelwood will have several challenges. One of the primary hurdles is resistance to change among key stakeholders, including faculty, students, and parents. Traditional grading methods may be deeply ingrained, making it challenging to adopt a new approach. Additionally, aligning the existing curriculum and assessment practices to the identified standards can be a complex and time-consuming task. Teachers at boarding schools dislike change and love tradition, so a change in grading will be the most difficult hurdle. Another challenge could be insufficient professional development and training opportunities for teachers, hindering their ability to effectively implement the new grading system. Even if the resources are available, the appropriate amount of time allotted to learn and discuss this new system will never be enough. Due to the change in grading, confusion and misunderstandings may arise among students and parents, potentially leading to dissatisfaction with the system, and time-consuming conferences between students and parents. To ensure successful implementation, continuous support and adequate resources and time are crucial as sustaining the process requires ongoing commitment. Moreover, the presence of discrepancies in grading practices among different teachers in the same grade or subject may impact the fairness and consistency of the standard-based grading system. Addressing these barriers proactively right from the start of the committee is vital to maximize the benefits of standard-based grading and enhance its impact on student learning and achievement.

**Marvelwood C.A.R.E.S.** To help us through the transition we will use the acronym C.A.R.E.S.: Collaborative Approach to Reinforcing Educational Standards. C.A.R.E.S

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beautifully captures the spirit of teamwork and dedication towards ensuring high-quality education and the alignment of grading practices with established standards. This acronym will represent the school's commitment to fostering collaboration among all stakeholders and reinforcing educational excellence through standards-based grading. Each letter carries a specific meaning that reflects the school's commitment to providing a high-quality and holistic education for its students.

- **Collaborative**: Collaboration among various stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, students, and parents. The school recognizes that achieving educational excellence requires the collective effort of the entire learning community. Collaborative decision-making and open communication contribute to the success of this new initiative.
- **Approach**: The letter "A" emphasizes a comprehensive approach: careful planning, professional development, and ongoing support for successful integration of standards-based grading.
- **Reinforcing**: The letter R underscores the focus on maintaining and reinforcing consistent and rigorous educational standards within the classroom.
- **Educational Standards**: The letter "E" points to the central role of educational standards in shaping the learning experience at Marvelwood. These standards define what students are expected to know and be able to do, and they guide curriculum development and instructional strategies. Aligning grading practices with these standards ensures that students are assessed against meaningful and relevant learning objectives.

By adopting the C.A.R.E.S. approach, Marvelwood cares for its students and will continue to strive to create a learning environment where collaboration, academic rigor, and



adherence to educational standards foster a holistic and supportive educational experience for all students.

### **Conclusion**

The Marvelwood School can achieve great success in transitioning from traditional grading to standards-based grading through the support of administrative leaders, experienced teachers, willing students, and parents. Acknowledging the importance of standards-based grading and its potential to enhance student achievement, the school will discover value in making a transition. By embracing a strong standards-based grading approach, educators can effectively guide their students toward achieving specific learning objectives. This intentional and accountable shift in the grading system will not only empower teachers but also promote a deeper understanding of the material among students. As we reform the approach to assessment, The Marvelwood School will witness improved student outcomes and foster a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that is aligned with the school's mission. With support, patience, professional development, and consistent communication with stakeholders, we can ensure a successful transition to standards-based grading, enriching the educational experience for everyone involved.

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