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The transition to a proficiency-based instruction and grading model: a case study of one middle school

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THE TRANSITION TO A PROFICIENCY-BASED
INSTRUCTION AND GRADING MODEL:
A CASE STUDY OF ONE MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the transition to a proficiency-based grading model recently adopted by a large, suburban school district in the Pacific Northwest using a case study approach. The primary research component included the use of personal interviews at one middle school to assess the perceptions on a variety of considerations related to a proficiency-based grading model, especially challenges to change, the factors which have allowed reform to move forward, and the changes in classroom environment as a result of adopting proficiency-based instructional methods. The secondary research component looked at the larger context of change within the school district through additional interviews with district leaders and survey data provided by the school district.

While there is a plethora of research on the weaknesses of traditional grading methods and best practices for assessment and grading, there is very little research to date on a whole-school transition away from traditional grading to a proficiency-based model. Under a proficiency-based grading model, proficiency-based practices are utilized, such as learning targets, formative assessments, and rubric grading. Final grades are determined based on evidence of achieved proficiency of learning targets rather than points or percentages. It is a fairly new model of grading that has taken a foothold in a small number of districts around the nation and is based on current measurement theory as to best practices in grading and assessment.

The first two research questions focused on the transition process to the new grading model, including the challenges to change and the factors that allowed reform at this school to move forward. Findings indicate that the most significant challenges identified by district leaders, teachers, and school administrators were a shortage of time and inadequate technology.

Other moderate concerns included increased job requirements, challenges by external stakeholders, and lack of professional development. Despite these challenges, findings revealed three factors which enabled reform to move forward: 1) a paradigm shift in thinking about grading, 2) visionary leadership, and 3) a collaborative culture. This school has overcome their barriers to change, expanded their building capacity and re-cultured the school, enabling a successful transition and a continuation of the new grading model.

The third research question addressed changes to the learning environment as a result of implementing proficiency-based instructional practices at this school. Three key changes in teaching and learning were evident from the case-study interviews and district-wide surveys: 1) a new, clearer language of learning, 2) focused teaching of learning targets, and 3) positive changes in assessment practices. Taken together, these changes have resulted in improved communication regarding student achievement, and teachers perceive that these changes have made a positive impact on the learning environment for students at this school.

There is vigorous discussion among the research community as to the most effective instructional practices, quality assessment, and the best method for reporting student achievement. Therefore, this study is timely as it provides a contribution to the literature on instruction, assessment, and school reform, while providing guidance to school districts that are reforming their grading practices to a proficiency-based model.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Mention tests and grading, and it is easy to conjure up images of the solitary teacher, surrounded by piles of papers and a red pen. It has been estimated that K-12 classroom teachers spend between 30% to 50% of their daily work time on assessment and grading (Brookhart, 2009; Mertler, 2004). Grading is a critically important function that impacts all other teacher functions, in that quality assessment and grading practices can improve student motivation, increase learning opportunities, and increase achievement levels (Brookhart, 1999). Yet throughout the history of the profession, teachers have made grading decisions in the isolation of their classroom with minimal direction from school or district policies (O'Conner, 2009).

An essential skill for teachers is assessment literacy, which is defined as an educator's ability to know what they are assessing, why they are doing it, how best to assess the skill or knowledge of interest, how to monitor and adjust the assessment process, while also understanding the negative consequences of poor, inaccurate assessment (Stiggins, 1995). While assessment literacy is extremely important for educators, not everyone agrees as to the best model for assessment and grading. During the last two decades, the question of how to correctly measure and report student achievement has become an important debate among educational researchers and community stakeholders (Austin & McCann, 1992; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992).

In the 21st century, criterion-referenced grading and reporting, commonly known as standards-based grading or proficiency-based grading, has taken a foothold in American schools. As more and more educational researchers question the reliability and validity of traditional grading practices which use percentages and A-F ratings (Cross & Frary, 1999; Marzano, 2000),

there is a great deal of discussion about reforming grading practices to ensure a more accurate measure of student achievement. The current literature on assessment is permeated by arguments that grading should be directly linked to a defined set of instructional goals which are measured for proficiency over the course of a set grading period (Guskey, 2001; Marzano, 2010; O'Conner, 2009; Stiggins, 2007). Under this model, teachers and school districts select subject-specific content that matches with key content standards laid out by their state and subject area. Final grades communicate the achievement of learning targets, and students are given multiple opportunities to improve and meet learning goals. A small number of K-12 school districts in each state have adopted this new paradigm of instruction and assessment, which appears to be transforming teaching and learning in a positive direction (Kirk & Acord, 2011).

Proficiency-based instruction incorporates the latest research on effective instructional practices, such as learning targets, formative assessments, student-centered learning, and high-quality rubrics (Davies, 2007b). There is evidence that the elements of formative assessments and self-assessments used in this model also increase motivation and self-regulation of learning, resulting in higher levels of learning and student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, 1997; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The field of educational research is combining brain research (Jensen, 2008), psychology (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009) and educational measurement theory (Guskey & Bailey, 2001) to create one body of knowledge on the path to educational excellence. While the research is abundant, there is an obvious disconnect between the literature and the current practice of the majority of teachers (Marzano, 2000). During the last decade, however, small pockets of change in grading methods can be seen in individual teachers and a small number of schools around the nation (Brookhart, Moss & Long, 2008;

Deddah, Main & Fulkerson, 2010; Oregon Business Council, 2010; Scriffiny, 2008; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004).

Discussion on new methods of grading and reporting must include the necessary transition process to shift teachers and schools away from grading methods that have been entrenched for nearly a century (Cureton, 1971; Marzano, 2000). Transitioning to a new, systemic grading model requires a complete paradigm shift to a new way of thinking about instruction and assessment. There are considerable barriers to change, so implementing this model throughout a school or school district poses a significant challenge. In order to challenge the status quo that has dominated grading systems for decades, assessment experts contend that teachers will need to reexamine their fundamental assumptions about the purpose and design of assessment (Marzano, 2000; Reeves, 2007). Principals and teacher leaders would have to initiate a re-culturing process that sees teachers as learners, collaborating together for school improvement while building an essential knowledge base needed for change to occur (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Fullan (2007) contends that leaders must also convince various stakeholders that simply because teachers, students, and parents are comfortable with the old system does not mean that traditional grading is the best way to measure student achievement. In sum, creating a new paradigm for grading and assessment requires not only restructuring, but also a re-culturing of the total school environment. A new norm supported by a new knowledge base is critical for sustainable change.

Statement of the Problem

This research explored the transition to a proficiency-based grading model recently adopted by a large, suburban school district in the Pacific Northwest. The research had a primary and secondary component. The primary component included the use of personal interviews with

teachers and administrators at one middle school to assess the perceptions on a variety of considerations related to the Proficiency Learning System, especially challenges to change, the factors which have allowed reform to move forward, and the changes in classroom environment as a result of adopting proficiency-based instructional methods. The secondary component examined the larger context of change within the school district through additional interviews with district leaders and survey data provided by the school district. The existing data provided by the school district had both qualitative and quantitative components which allowed for additional insight into changes in instructional methods and perceptions regarding the adoption of the proficiency-based grading model at all of the district's middle schools. There is ongoing and vigorous discussion on the effectiveness of grading based on proficiency, both in the research community and among school leaders. At the local level, numerous schools in Oregon are considering transitioning to this new model. Thus, this study is timely as it will provide a contribution to the literature on instruction, assessment, and school reform, while providing guidance to school districts who are reforming their grading practices.

The school district chosen for the study uses the term *Proficiency Learning System*. It is one of only a handful of districts in the state of Oregon to move to a grading system based on proficiency of learning targets. Since the district used in this study switched to their proficiency-based grading model in the fall of 2009, teachers will have insights about the transition process and will be able to compare it to traditional grading methods. The school under study is still in the implementation process, so teachers and leaders will be able to reflect on barriers to change as well as present concerns with the reform process. Additionally, the specific school chosen for the case study is ahead of the other middle schools in this district in the reform process, so an in-depth study of this school may reveal the factors that contribute to successful transitions.

The research incorporated a case study approach using personal interviews with 10 teachers and two administrators at one middle school to examine the process of change and perceptions on how this reform has impacted the learning environment. To provide additional insight on district-wide reform efforts, the past and present curriculum directors in the district were interviewed to offer clarification as to the reform process at the district level. In addition, the school district has been collecting data on all eight of its middle schools pertaining to changes in instructional methods and perceptions about the new system. The district surveys did not include data on the transition process, so the survey data could only be used to provide supporting data for the research question that examined changes in the learning environment. By triangulation of the data, this study provided a clearer picture of the transition process, the factors that contribute to successful implementation of a proficiency-based grading model, and changes in the learning environment that emerged from this reform.

Research Questions

1. What do teachers and school leaders perceive to be the most significant challenges related to change in transitioning from a traditional grading system to a proficiency-based grading model?
2. What factors were cited by teachers and leaders as fostering the implementation of proficiency-based instructional and grading practices in a suburban school district?
3. What changes in the learning environment have teachers experienced in adopting proficiency-based instructional practices within their classrooms?

Definition of Terms

Academic Self-Efficacy: individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their learning (Bandura, 1993)

Assessment: vehicles for gathering information about students' achievement or behavior (Marzano, 2000).

Assessment Literacy: the readiness of an educator to design, discuss, and implement successful assessments based on current research and theory (Mertler, 2004).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): gains in the numbers of students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading and math.

Capacity building: “a policy, strategy, or action taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of people working individually and together” (Fullan, 2007, p. 58).

Feedback: feedback is defined as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, self) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Formative Assessment: information gathered and reported for use in the development of knowledge and skills. It is assessment in the beginning and middle stages of a unit, to gauge what the student knows and what learning gaps there are that still need to be filled in before the summative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Learning Targets: (also called learning goals or learning destinations) targets are translated standards into a language that students and parents can understand; targets are also very specific to the knowledge or skill which needs to be learned (Davies, 2007b).

Motivation: a complex, overarching concept which includes external and internal factors that influence dispositions for learning. Key factors for motivation include self-awareness and

beliefs about personal control, interests and goals, and expectations for success or failure (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003).

Non-Achievement factors: other considerations used to calculate a grade, such as attendance, work completion, effort, and behavior. Advocates of standards-based grading believe that teachers should either extremely limit or eliminate non-achievement factors in final grades.

Professional learning communities (PLC): “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223).

Proficiency-based instruction: instructional practices which provide learning targets, formative assessment, student-centered learning, and rubrics for summative assessments. Learning is measured by achievement of proficiency of learning targets (Kirk & Acord, 2010).

Rubric: description of knowledge or skill for a specific learning target; rubrics show learning progressions toward more sophisticated levels of knowledge or skill and what exactly is needed to reach proficiency on a learning target (Marzano, 2010).

Standards-based Grading: (also known as proficiency grading or criterion-referenced grading) report card grades are directly linked to a defined set of instructional goals which are measured for proficiency over the course of a set grading period (Brookhart, 2009).

Student Achievement: Student performance of the learning goals on which their classroom lessons were based. School achievements are generally one of four types: knowledge, reasoning, performance skills, or products (Brookhart, 2009; Stiggins, 2005).

Summative Assessment: Assessment/evaluation designed to provide information to be used in making judgments about a student’s achievement at the end of the unit or period of instruction (O’Conner, 2009).

Limitations and Delimitations

First, data from the district surveys is limited because I did not have control over the design of the surveys or the questions posed in the surveys. By using existing data compiled by the district and external evaluator, some of the survey questions did not directly address the research questions and were therefore not of use for this study. Ultimately, the survey data were only useful for research question number three. Additionally, the personal interviews may elicit a social desirability effect. I emphasized to the participants that their answers would be confidential and then asked them to be honest. Although the case study method allows for an in-depth understanding of a process, I will not be able to make generalizations to the larger population beyond this one school. However, since the first research question is exploratory, it is my intention that this study will contribute to theory-building on this topic. Also, triangulation of the data will provide validity to the research.

There are delimitations to the research in that proficiency-based instruction and grading has numerous components that are difficult to investigate all at once. There are other specific aspects to proficiency-based practices, such as portfolio evidence and different kinds of summative assessments, which are not addressed in this study. In addition, even though the Proficiency Learning System has been implemented across the entire district, implementation has varied by school, and schools are at different stages in the reform process. As a result, the findings will only apply the school used in the study. Another delimitation is that the research focuses on the perceptions of teachers and school leaders and does not include other key stakeholders, such as parents.

A potential bias may be present because I live in the school district under study. My child is learning under the proficiency-based grading model, and I have participated in numerous

informal conversations with parents, teachers and students as to their opinions about the implementation of the Proficiency Learning System. However, I believe that this information was an impetus to my choice of dissertation topic and helped shape my research direction and focus.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The Old Model

The traditional grading system which dominates the K-12 public school system today emerged over 100 years ago, as high schools developed their own grading practices based on ranking methods used by colleges. Percentage grading became common by the end of the 19th century, eventually evolving into letter grades that were used to rank and sort students (Cureton, 1971). Today, the most common way to assign report card grades is to assign a letter grade of A,B,C, D or F based on combining individual assignments with the percentage method, and then translating a range of percentages into grades. During the 1980s, about 80% of K-12 schools were using letter grades from the fourth grade on, with most of the remainder of schools keeping grades as a percentage number (Robinson & Craver, 1989). Central to traditional grading is the idea that all assignments and tests are worth a certain number of points, so the final grade is based on point-accumulation. The teacher often includes non-achievement factors in calculating the grade, such as effort and work completion. The dominance of traditional grading practices has continued into the 21st century (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The long-term use of the traditional grading model has resulted in the assumption that grades include percentages and A-F descriptors, and this mindset has become clearly embedded in educational culture.

As the 20th Century progressed, norm-referenced grading became common, as educators started to use the bell curve to make their grading more aligned with scientific theory. The norm-referenced model stipulates that most phenomena occur around a middle, or average point, while few occur at either the high or low extreme ends. Commonly known as *the bell curve*, this model was adopted to measure human behavior, and thus grading started to follow this

distribution (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008; Marzano, 2000). Although norm-referenced grading has been seriously challenged in the research (Marzano, 2000; Reeves, 2007), the idea of the average student is strongly embedded in traditional grading, with the bell curve in the back of the minds of many teachers. However, Guskey, quoted in Olson (1995), argues that this is detrimental to student learning:

...one of the things that we find consistent in the research that has looked into grading and reporting are the detrimental aspects of grading on the curve. When you do grade on the curve, it makes learning a highly competitive activity. Students compete against each other for the few scarce rewards--the high grades--that are going to be administered by the teacher. It sets learning up as a win-lose situation for the students. And because the number of high grades is typically limited, most students will be losers. (p. 24)

By using the bell curve as a reference for grading, a teacher is assuming that the performance of students should or will follow that curve. By forcing the scores into a normal distribution, the opportunity for all students to learn and succeed is eliminated. The bell curve compares student performance to the performance of other students rather than to an objective standard. As a result, some measurement experts call the bell curve the wrong model for evaluating educational achievement (Reeves, 2007).

The bell curve model is only one of many criticisms about traditional grading. Quite early on in the 20th Century, experimenters began to see that 100% was a meaningless concept, for there was a great deal of inconsistency as to what teachers measured and how they measured it (Cureton, 1971). Studies in the early 1900's questioned the reliability of grades, as grades on the same math and writing papers varied by as much as 35 to 40 points, using a percentage scale of

100 (Brookhart, 2009). A Committee on Grading in 1933 claimed that grading procedures at their school were a mess and in chaos (Marzano, 2000). The same criticisms can be seen from decade to decade, with particular concern with validity and reliability (Cross & Frary, 1999). In the old model, it is difficult to determine what exactly an “A” grade means. According to Marzano (2000), the key long-term criticisms of the traditional grading system include the variety of factors used to determine grades, the variability of weights of assignments and tests among teachers and across districts, and the misinterpretation of scores when single assessments are used to determine grades. Essentially, what many scholars have argued is that grades are so imprecise that they become basically meaningless.

The difficulties surrounding grading have been pervasive for decades, and if there is one area for consensus for educational measurement experts, it is that multiple problems exist with the traditional, A-F percentage grading. Willington, Pollack and Lewis (2000) offer a solid historical overview of the alarming variation in grading practices, grading components, and policies over the decades. The research concludes that the range of percentages used to arrive at letter grades varies considerably within schools, districts, and states. A revealing study by Austin and McCann (1992) documented a large variability in grading practices among districts. Moreover, this study also discovered that school policies on grading varied considerably and in many cases were quite vague. Another study cited by Marzano (2000) determined that teachers weigh assignments, tests, and non-achievement factors so differently that the same students with the same assessment information received different grades from different teachers. Because under the old model, there appears to be no uniform consensus about what is important, teachers assign grades based on individual preferences. As a result, a student’s grade varies considerably

depending on what teacher is assigned to the course, something students may try to use to their advantage to boost their GPA.

Such imprecise grading systems allow room for grade inflation because grades are not tied specifically to proficiency of learning targets. Conley (2000) refers to research where there was very little relationship between the grades a student received and if that student was proficient in the skills needed to attend college. Marzano (2000) cites numerous studies where the academic achievement needed to secure an A grade is much less than in previous decades. External pressures from various stakeholders have allowed a loosely-defined system to bend to the pressure to give A grades for doing good enough, but not excellent, work.

Part of the traditional grading paradigm holds that non-achievement factors are a part of the report card grade. Research going back to the 1920s shows that teachers included non-achievement factors in grading, such as effort and attitude (Brookhart, 2009). This continues to the present day, as grades can be determined more by effort and responsibility than learning. Austin and McCann (1992) discovered that across 144 school districts in one state, participation, homework completion, attendance, attitude, and even discipline factors were being used to determine grades. Teachers often feel outside pressure from the culture to include such factors as effort into the grade. A study by Cross and Frary (1999) found that teachers believed that the realities of classroom culture influenced them to include non-achievement factors in grading. The majority of students in this same study also strongly endorsed the inclusion of effort and class participation in the calculation of grades. In another example, Marzano (2000) confirmed that effort, behavior, cooperation, and attendance were factors considered by some teachers, with effort being especially considered. These studies reveal that factors such as effort and responsibility may lead to grades based on behavior, not on learning. Additionally, homework

completion is so integrated into the traditional grading paradigm that D's and F's are often a reflection of incomplete homework, not ability (Vatterott, 2009). Overall, the points system used in traditional grading methods provides a murky picture of what the student has learned in the class. According to Marzano (2000), "by using total points as the overall indicator of how students have performed, we lose a great deal of information about students' understanding" (p. 7). The result is an inconsistent, ineffective system of hodge-podge grading (Cross & Frary, 1999).

Reform within the old model.

Even though education reform was prevalent in the late 20th century, the mandates coming from the national and state governments only minimally impacted the old model and allowed traditional grading methods to remain intact. Reform was centered around the implementation of content standards, and increasing student achievement for disadvantaged groups was at the heart of the reform movement. The focus was on outcomes, not instructional methods or grading systems, resulting in the continued dominance of traditional grading practices.

The standards movement of the late 20th century forced traditional grading systems to align curriculum to national and state standards by subject. In response to the *A Nation At Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics led the way in creating a set of national standards to establish criteria for excellence in mathematics education (Ravitch, 1995). In 1994, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* provided a "national framework for education reform" (U.S. Congress, 1994). This act created a National Education Standards and Improvement Council to identify and promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of standards. Soon after this

legislation was enacted, national organizations started creating their own standards, and the National Department of Education worked closely with such organizations as the National Geographic Society, Center for Civic Education, The Center for the Study of Reading, and the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages to create standards for the various academic subjects (Ravitch, 1993). States soon followed with their own state-level standards, such as Oregon's House Bill 3565, known as the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st century, which established Essential Learning Skills and rigorous academic content standards (Hargis, 1995).

Following the establishment of content standards, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) ushered in a new chapter in K-12 education. NCLB is a highly influential law which holds schools accountable for demonstrating student achievement in reading and math as measured by state assessment scores. NCLB requires states to establish content standards for students and to report student achievement on these standards. NCLB forced school districts to align their curriculum with the external assessments in an effort to raise test scores and make adequate yearly progress goals. With large-scale external assessments created by their state to measure student progress toward attainment of standards, school districts have found it necessary to make sure that these standards are being taught and emphasized in the regular classroom. An aligned set of standards are currently being implemented, moving from the state, into the school districts, and finally in the classroom (Ainsworth, 2011).

NCLB launched a new era in K-12 schools, epitomized by high-stakes testing which occurs multiple times a year in every grade level. The research concludes that the federal mandates embedded in NCLB have resulted in negative changes in instructional methods, where

the focus of teaching is mainly on test-taking skills and practice tests (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003; Stiggins, 1999a). In effect, the standards movement has occurred within the old paradigm of traditional grading methods, resulting in criticism from the research community. “Using strategies from the past –such as more testing, more failure and retention, higher standards, more rewards, greater punishments, and tighter control over students and their learning –is hurting, not helping” (Davies, 2007b, p. 111). In an effort to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), which is defined as gains in the numbers of students meeting or exceeding standards, schools have increased instruction in reading and math, the two subjects which are accountable to federal mandates. While more emphasis on math and reading has resulted in gains in those two areas, a negative outcome of NCLB is curricular narrowing, where subjects such as social studies, physical education, and the arts are sacrificed to provide more math and reading time (Ravitch, 2010).

Moreover, the focus on standards and accountability has ignored the research on how students learn best and what motivates them to become self-regulated learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998). While states have seen a rise in test scores and have alleviated some of the achievement gaps with minority students, schools have sacrificed authentic learning for short-term increases in test scores. The gains in test scores at the state level were typically the result of teaching students test-taking skills and strategies, rather than deepening their knowledge of the world (Ravitch, 2010, p. 110). Standards-based reform at the federal and state level does not address the process of teaching, so it will likely fail to reach its goals unless the focus moves from testing to instructional practice. Kohn (2004) is very critical of the traditional grading practices that remain in standards-based education. Noting that one can still enter the majority of classrooms to find textbooks, lectures, and skills worksheets, Kohn laments that “nothing bears the greater

responsibility for undermining educational excellence than the continued dominance of traditional instruction” (p. 42). Effective teaching is at the heart of student learning, so a focus on instructional practice should be central to any successful school reform efforts. Overall, the emphasis on high-stakes testing could be having a negative effect on the teaching community as a whole. Barth (2001) warns that public scrutiny regarding standardized test scores has had a chilling effect on the teaching profession.

Despite limitations of the No Child Left Behind Law, the journey to school improvement does involve state and national standards. Standards allow teachers to see the big picture and to create curriculum maps of what knowledge and skills should be acquired at a particular grade level and subject (Jacobs, 1997). Also, the standards movement changed a haphazard, disjointed curriculum that varied greatly from district to district and teacher to teacher to more uniform expectations about challenging content. According to Ravitch, historian of education and former Assistant Secretary of Education, until the standards movement of the 1990s, the education system was “riddled with in-equity, incoherence, and inefficiency” (Ravitch, 1993, p. 771). Standards-based education now allows curriculum to be aligned with state assessments and provides accountability as to what content is being taught at each grade level. Additionally, it creates high expectations of students, which is a key prerequisite to increased student achievement and closing achievement gaps (Barth, 2001).

At the same time, there is concern that the focus on measuring school achievement and learning through standardized testing could be leading instruction and assessment in the wrong direction. The concern with prominent assessment researchers like Stiggins (1999a) is that the emphasis on standardized tests is founded on a set of incorrect assumptions about the

relationship between assessment and student and teacher motivation. Stiggins (1999) claims that conventional wisdom surrounding educational reform is hurting, not helping students to succeed:

We assume that we can stimulate maximum teacher effort and student learning by threatening public embarrassment for both students and teachers if students don't succeed academically. We assume that the reason students do not learn is that teachers and students are not putting forth the effort required to succeed. Thus the key to success is to find ways to compel students and teachers to work harder. And the conventional wisdom has been that the way to spur greater effort is through intimidation by means of the threat of dire consequences for low test scores. (p. 191)

Stiggins aptly points out that such testing by itself does not produce school improvement because the tests do not address teacher effectiveness or student motivation. In fact, the current impact of NCLB could be creating a school learning environment that is the opposite of what was intended in the recent national school reform initiatives. The research community has evidence that high-stakes testing decreases motivation for learning (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003). Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) have concluded that high stakes tests have caused as many chronic low achievers to give up in the face of what they believe to be unattainable achievement standards. Kohn (2004) sums up the era of NCLB by saying that parents should be asking themselves, "What was taken away from my children's education in order to make them better at taking standardized tests?" (p. 64). Have pages and pages of standards and multiple, yearly tests really forced teachers to change *how* they teach? Not really. That requires a paradigm shift in thinking about teaching and learning and comprehensive school reform beyond the standards movement.

A New Model

Standards-based education is likely to remain part of 21st century schools, but that does not mean traditional grading practices have to remain embedded within this model. True standards-based reform moves beyond aligning concepts and skills by grade level to changing instructional practices (Lawrenz, Huffman, & Lavoie, 2005). An offshoot of the standards movement has been the creation of standards-based grading systems, which sometimes are confused with the larger standards movement. While standards-based grading utilizes state and national standards to create learning targets, the standards-based grading model is a complete paradigm shift away from traditional grading practices. It is a criterion-referenced grading system rooted in mastery learning principles, where a student's grade is determined not by a percentage but the achievement of learning targets. The standards-based grading model uses the latest theories and research in effective instructional practices, making it a comprehensive reform model of teaching, learning, grading, and reporting. Taken together, these practices fall under the umbrella of *proficiency-based instruction*, also known as *proficiency-based education*.

Experts in educational research contend that the journey to successful improvement of teaching and learning begins with standards but is rooted in proficiency-based instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, 2009; Davies, 2007b; Marzano, 2000). Proficiency-based instruction integrates the latest theories and research in instruction, assessment, and motivation. Ideas about proficiency-based instruction actually emerged long before the standards movement, pulling from theory about mastery learning (Bloom, 1971). Bloom's concept of Mastery Learning led the way in advocating for teaching and learning which included learning goals, flexibility in the time allowed to meet criteria, non-competitive assessments, and collection of

evidence of learning. While the Clinton and Bush presidential administrations were hammering out new laws and federal mandates, educational measurement experts advocated for a criterion-referenced assessment model which awarded grades based on specific achievement of knowledge and skills rather than traditional, hodge-podge grading practices (Brookhart, 1994; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992).

In the last two decades of the 20th century, serious calls for reform in the area of instruction, assessment, and grading have permeated the literature (Brookhart, 1994; Hattie, 1992; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). Brookhart (1994), a leader in the reform efforts to improve instructional practices and grading, believes that studies of grading practices clearly document a gap between current practice and measurement theory. The second-half of the 20th century saw a growing number of advocates to make grading related to instructional goals, and for grades to be linked to the mastery of learning targets. The driving force behind criterion-referenced grading is to measure the extent to which a student has reached a specific level of skill or knowledge. Scholars in the field of educational measurement hold the position that grades must emerge from a criterion-referenced approach, and the primary purpose of those grades should be to offer feedback on achievement of educational objectives (Brookhart, 1994; Marzano, 2000).

In recent years, the scholarly research community has become strong advocates of moving toward a new paradigm of grading and assessment, commonly known as standards-based grading or proficiency grading. Those embracing the new paradigm of grading believe that the primary purpose of grades should be to communicate with students and parents about achievement of learning goals. Grades should be based on high-quality evidence, and teachers should be able to clearly explain what that evidence is and how they evaluated the quality of student work (Brookhart, 2009). Additionally, under the standards-based grading paradigm, the

majority of the learning targets should focus on higher-level thinking skills and enduring understanding rather than rote memorization of facts (Stiggins, 2005; Winger, 2009).

With proficiency-based instruction, assessment takes on a whole new meaning. Rather than a test or project at the end of unit, assessment becomes a day-to-day monitoring of progress in learning that offers strategies to meet the learning targets. A key element of proficiency-based instruction is formative assessments, which provide information to both students and teachers about where the learning gaps exist and what needs to be done to reach proficiency. The latest research is intensely focused on formative assessment, revealing that formative assessment has strong links to increased student motivation, self-regulated learning, self-efficacy and achievement (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). In this new model, summative assessments also include performance tasks and portfolio evidence which cannot be measured on standardized tests (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The standards-based grading model emphasizes the demonstration of student achievement and limits non-achievement factors in grading. Consequently, it is argued that standards-based grading provides a more authentic reflection of learning and thus limits the problems with grade inflation (Marzano, 2000; O'Conner, 2009).

The result is a completely new paradigm in grading and assessment which is a colossal shift away from traditional grading systems. The Oregon Proficiency Project (Kirk & Acord, 2010) developed a shared understanding of the principles of proficiency-based practices:

In brief, proficiency-based education is guided by principles of student-centered teaching, standards-based achievement, ongoing assessment, engaging students' initiative, and collaborative professional learning for instructors. It links curriculum, learning targets, and lesson plans to high postsecondary standards.

Skilled teachers transform their work so that students become active, intentional partners in the learning process, developing strong intellectual habits, academic knowledge and content knowledge. Consequently, proficiency-based instruction involves students in understanding learning targets, rubrics, and the assessment process. It gauges student progression on an ongoing basis through formative assessment. It allows students to learn at their own pace –time becomes a variable. Achievement of standards becomes the new constant. In a proficiency-based system, student grades and transcript credits are based on demonstrated proficiency. (p. 2)

The principles outlined above by the Oregon Proficiency Project show that effective teaching is central to proficiency-based education. In this new grading model, how the final grade is reported is only one, small component of the process.

In theory, within the arena of proficiency evaluation, there would be no letter grades used for reporting the attainment of proficiencies. Elementary report cards can easily be adapted to this new grading model. However, secondary schools have more issues because of the need for reporting letter grades and GPAs for higher education and employment. Middle schools have an easier time eliminating the A-F grade, but high schools are forced to conform to align with higher education. There are multiple ways in which a standards-based grading system can be converted to a letter grade for final reporting. In fact, the current literature tackles this question and offers a myriad of options for grading and reporting (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000). The body of theory on how to accurately translate the grade into A-F is still developing, resulting in a variety of different methods (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; O'Conner, 2009). There is still debate within the body of theory surrounding the use of non-achievement factors in the

grade, especially in those districts with a single reporting grade. Ideally, it is argued that non-achievement factors should be separated and reported separately, and some grading software programs allow this, especially at the elementary level.

At the secondary level it is still the norm to report one letter grade on the report card, so there is considerable discussion in the literature regarding the inclusion of non-achievement factors in the report card grade. There is general agreement that non-achievement factors should be limited, but some measurement experts contend that non-achievement factors should not be included at all. O’Conner (2009) makes that claim that “strong effort, active participation, and positive attitude are highly valued attributes, but if grades are to have clear meaning, they should not include these attributes” (p. 97). Marzano (2000) has supported the option to include non-achievement factors as a minor consideration, understanding that the current school culture favors this position. In all cases, the literature contends that non-achievement factors should be recorded separately in the grade book and should never be allowed to dominate the final grade (Guskey, 2009; Winger, 2009).

Assigning grades purely on proficiency of learning targets has created some controversy by those who believe that teaching life skills is just as important as teaching learning targets. The concept of removing non-achievement factors from the grade has caused a negative reaction from some parents, teachers, and members of the business community who believe that children who demonstrate effort and responsibility should be rewarded. Also, teachers perceive factors of effort, behavior and attendance as important to success outside of school, so there is a continued push to keep these factors as part of the grade (Marzano, 2000). Specific life skills identified by researchers as critical for workplace success include personal responsibility and working well with others (SCANS, 1991). Polls of U.S. adults provide similar data, as life skills such as

dependability and self-management were rated the highest of necessary workplace skills (Marzano, 2000). Consensus on the role of non-achievement factors in grade calculation is not likely to be reached anytime soon.

By linking grades to achievement of learning targets and limiting non-achievement factors, measurement experts contend that standards-based grading increases validity and reliability (Brookhart, 2009). When assessments match learning goals, district objectives, and state standards, and grades are based primarily or completely on achievement of these learning goals, the grade becomes a valid indicator of learning. Additionally, quality rubrics, embraced and used by departments, coupled with dialogue about what proficiency on a learning target actually means, enables a higher reliability and a reduction of variability seen among different teachers (Brookhart, 2009). In the standards-based grading system, teachers give up some freedom and choice in what they teach and how they grade, but the trade off can be more consistency across teachers, subjects, and districts, allowing for more precise measurement of student learning.

The use of rubrics is the main method of standards-based grading, for it has been argued that rubrics offer more reliability and validity to grades and can also have a positive impact on student learning (Davies, 2007b; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Marzano, 2000). Although rubrics have been in use for quite some time, they are essential in a standards-based grading model. First, the teacher or team identifies the level of knowledge and skills required to meet proficiency on an assessment. From there, different levels of proficiency are created, such as *highly proficient*, *proficient*, *approaching proficiency*, and *beginning*. There are a myriad of terms in use for the proficiency scale, but they all measure the level at which the student has met the specific standard in that subject area. Teacher teams collaborate to define what is deemed proficient for

a learning target, which makes grading more reliable and consistent. To be most effective, rubrics are given out at the beginning of a unit or project so the student knows exactly what knowledge, skills or tasks are required to demonstrate proficiency. These learning destinations are defined at the beginning so students clearly understand their achievement goals (Davies, 2007a). The student knows exactly what is expected of him/her to reach proficiency in a learning target, so it becomes a more achievable expectation. Students can even help create rubrics, helping them to self-assess in the process (Davies, 2007b). At the end of grading period, teacher and student examine portfolio and grade book evidence to document the extent to which the student achieved proficiency of learning targets. Grades become a reflective process, rather than the accumulation of points.

Despite the body of theory which supports a reformation toward standards-based grading systems, not everyone is on board to move in this direction. One of the criticisms of standards-based grading is that a strict focus on standards limits choice and creativity in student learning. Kohn (2004) has called standards the *bunch-o-facts approach* to education, where the goal is to cover material rather than to provide intellectual inspiration. He views the best type of schooling to be centered around problems, questions, and projects as opposed to facts and skills:

Considerable research has demonstrated the importance of making sure students are actively involved in designing their own learning, invited to play a role in formulating questions, creating projects, and so on. But the more comprehensive and detailed a list of standards, the more students (and even teachers) are excluded from this process, the more alienated they tend to become, and the more teaching becomes a race to cover a huge amount of material. (Kohn, 2004, p. 48)

Standards have been selected based on their testability, so exploring and guiding one's own learning process to an unknown destination is not a part of standards-based education. In addition, Barth (2001) believes that standards-based education limits the freedom to do experiential learning, in which knowledge comes from direct, personal exploration of the immediate environment. Even though students in outdoor adventure programs show significant gains in problem-solving skills, leadership, independence, and social skills, experiential learning is not uniform, so it is difficult to evaluate in conventional ways. In effect, it is difficult to mesh a standards-based approach with experiential learning and intellectual exploration.

There are numerous studies that compared teaching methods with student achievement, finding that proficiency-based instruction produced higher achievement than traditional teaching practices. One researcher found that teaching for understanding promotes long-term retention, while the rote memorization involved in trying to maximize test scores limits higher-order thinking and long-term comprehension (Nuthall & Alton-Lee, 1995). Additionally, Wiliam et al. (2004) cite several studies in which authentic classroom tasks involving constructing knowledge and requiring student responsibility for their own learning outperformed students whose teachers used a traditional approach of emphasizing practice of test items. Therefore, it is important to delineate between standards-based reform which still permits traditional grading practices, and standards-based reform that is rooted in proficiency-based instruction.

Motivation and self-regulation in the new model.

The learning process involves a motivational component, so any discussion surrounding effective instruction and grading practices must include theory and research on motivation. In the field of education, motivation is a complex, overarching concept which includes external and internal factors that influence dispositions for learning. Key factors for motivation include self-

awareness and beliefs about personal control, interests and goals, and expectations for success or failure (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003). Motivation is a vital component of learning, for there is a *will* that must go along with the *skill* of learning, so the student will put forth the effort and self-regulatory processes needed to move learning forward (Pintrich, 2004).

There is a large body of research on what motivates students to learn, what increases self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, and what de-motivates students and reduces learning. There are also strong research connections between motivation and achievement. Students with higher motivation have increased self-efficacy, which leads to increased performance and higher test scores (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Rodriguez, 2004). Since self-regulatory strategies make a distinct, positive contribution to academic achievement apart from ability (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990), instructional techniques will either positively or negatively impact motivation and self-regulation in the classroom, thus impacting overall achievement.

Research reveals that there are connections between motivation and a learner's goal orientation. Ames and Archer (1988) completed a study which compared performance goal orientation to mastery goal orientation and the impact on attitudes and achievement. With a performance goal orientation, a student is concerned with success and showing ability to others, resulting in extrinsic motivation. With mastery goal orientation, sometimes called a learning goal orientation, the process of learning is valued, and there is intrinsic motivation to develop more skills. When students perceived their class environment as emphasizing mastery goals, they reported to use effective learning strategies, their attitudes about learning were more positive, and they saw a correlation between effort and success. Studies summarized by Wigfield, Hoa, and Klauda (2009) support this conclusion, especially in the area of the de-

motivating element of extrinsic goal orientation. With an extrinsic goal orientation, students are focused on the points or grades and not the learning.

The use of learning goals can impact motivation in a positive direction. One study indicated that when instruction was modified to change the goal orientation to mastery, motivation increased and achievement improved (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009). Goal orientation and goal setting directly ties into achievement, for research shows that individual expectations for success predict achievement outcomes (Wigfield et al., 2009). Additionally, studies reveal that setting difficult goals increases motivation and performance (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009). Explicit learning targets are shown to increase motivation, for students have a goal orientation and can visualize their target (Davies, 2007a; Stiggins, 2007). When students are involved from the beginning, they understand what is expected of them and therefore are more ready to learn. There is considerable evidence that mastery learning techniques, which embrace a learning (mastery) goal orientation, have positive effects on student learning. For example, Guskey (2007) cites numerous studies which show that mastery learning has a positive influence on test scores and grade point averages. Perhaps more importantly, mastery learning increases attitudes and self-confidence, causing a multiplier effect which improves motivation and thus overall achievement (Kulik, Kulik, & Bangert-Drowns, 1990).

In addition to goal orientation, task value is an important component of motivation. The value component of student motivation involves a student's belief about the importance and interest of a task (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Educational theory has long supported the premise that interest is a precursor to motivation and learning (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009). Today, research on self-regulated learning shows that interest, whether it is situational or intrinsic, can be an important component to keep students monitoring and adjusting their own

learning (Wigfield et al., 2009). However, the activity must have value for students to actively seek the knowledge or skill desired. This is one way that motivation, interest and self-regulation are intertwined, for self-regulatory techniques such as concentration and self-reflection become important only when the student values the outcome or skill involved in the learning task. As a result, mastery learning models should evaluate the task value of the learning targets to provide interest and relevance.

Some studies have found that task value is positively-correlated with academic achievement. A study by Pintrich and De Groot (1990) concluded that students who believed that their school work was interesting and important were more cognitively engaged in trying to learn and comprehend the material. Overall, the task value highly correlated to effort and academic performance. Research by Sungur (2007) duplicated these results, concluding that higher levels of motivational beliefs, including intrinsic goal orientation and task value, resulted in higher levels of metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating progress. These findings hold promise for teachers in knowing they can increase motivation and self-regulation by creating interest and providing relevance in the classroom learning experience.

There is consensus among educational theorists that the most effective learners are self-regulating (Butler & Winne, 1995). Self-regulation is a style of engaging with tasks in which students exhibit “a suite of powerful skills: setting goals for upgrading knowledge; deliberating about strategies...and, as steps are taken and the task evolves, monitoring the accumulating effects of their engagement” (Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 245). Evidence indicates that students who are good self-regulators can improve their achievement. They may be able to set better learning goals, implement more effective cognitive strategies, monitor and assess their progress

better, seek assistance when needed, expend effort, and persist when challenges arise (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009).

All students use regulatory processes, but what distinguishes self-regulators is the use of metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies to achieve their academic goals (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). Self-regulators use a self-oriented feedback loop in which students self-reflect on the effectiveness of their current methods and where their learning is in relation to their goal (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). It is a deliberate, adaptive process in which internal feedback becomes a way for students to monitor their own learning. Self-regulated learners also seek out external feedback to give them direction on how to bridge the gap between current and desired performance (Butler & Winne, 1995). Teachers can increase self-regulatory strategies in their students by allowing student-created goals, articulating learning goals, and offering feedback in relation to the goals. Teachers can also encourage all their students create their own feedback loop and monitor their own performance, thus increasing the use of self-regulatory behaviors in the classroom.

Effective instructional strategies can move a learner from an unmotivated state to a motivated state. Learned helplessness, which is evidenced by not caring, giving up, passivity, and low motivation can be unlearned by giving learners more choice and control over their environment, offering descriptive feedback, providing hope for success, and meeting learners needs and goals (Jensen, 2008). This results in intrinsic motivation, which is the voluntary engagement in an activity through natural curiosity. Jensen describes 17 strategies to increase intrinsic motivation, such as student choice and interest in the subject, so learning can become an end in itself and not a game to be played for a grade. Proficiency-based instructional practices can promote intrinsic motivation because they focus on learning goals, provide a sense of

control, increase frequency of descriptive feedback, decrease evaluative feedback, and help students feel capable of accomplishing their goals (Stiggins, 2007).

Quality feedback feeds into the self-regulatory processes which provides the impetus to achieve learning goals. Feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, or restructure information in memory (Butler & Winne, 1995). Feedback is part of the continuous cycle of learning and then reflecting on the learning, called the *learning loop* by Dewey back in the 1930's (cited in Davies, 2007b). The continuous cycle of learning is supported by current brain research, which reveals that the brain is continuously self-referencing (Davies, 2007b). In a review of hundreds of studies on feedback, Hattie and Timperley (2007) found that specific types of feedback are more effective than others:

To be effective, feedback needs to be clear, purposeful, meaningful, and compatible with students' prior knowledge and to provide logical connections. It also needs to prompt active information processing on the part of learners, have low task complexity, relate to specific and clear goals, and provide little threat to the person at the self level. (p. 104)

The best feedback is descriptive, in that it offers information that a student can use to fill the gaps in learning and provides direction as to what strategies can be used to reach the learning target (Brookhart, 2008). If feedback does not fulfill this purpose, it becomes evaluative feedback, which results in judgment on the student and thus ends the learning loop.

There is direct correlation between effective feedback and student achievement. Black and Wiliam (1998) analyzed the current research and found that increasing descriptive feedback increases student learning significantly, and it is especially effective with students who usually achieve the least. Descriptive feedback not only increases motivation and self-regulatory

processes, but it can result in higher achievement. Hattie (1992) found that providing students feedback about where their skill level was in terms of educational objectives increased achievement immensely, about 37 percentile points. Hattie has called feedback “the most powerful single innovation” that enhances student learning (p. 9).

The delivery of feedback through formative assessments is a critical component of standards-based grading systems (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Based on the ideas of information exchange, cooperation, and feedback, formative assessment creates opportunities for learning by gathering information while the process of learning is taking place (Brookhart, 2009). By offering formative assessment along the way, teachers create opportunities for a student to self-monitor and fill gaps to reach proficiency of a learning target. Teachers in a school district in western Pennsylvania, who became involved in a project to increase formative assessment practices, noticed a strong connection between formative assessment and motivation (Brookhart, Moss, & Long, 2008). “Over and over, teachers saw students get excited as formative assessments provided them more awareness of and control over their own learning. Armstrong teachers became excited too as they watched self-efficacy and self-regulation skills kick in for formerly unmotivated students” (Brookhart et al., 2008, p. 54)

A report on the success of 90/90/90 schools showed that frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement were a key element in raising achievement (Reeves, 2004). In these schools, where students are at a 90% poverty level and 90% are ethnic minorities, 90% of students met or exceeded high academic standards. One of five key factors of success found in the study was the use of formative assessment and regular feedback. Rather than one-time opportunities for success, classroom teachers in this study offered regular, constructive feedback and multiple opportunities to close the gap between current understanding

and the knowledge and skills needed to reach proficiency, resulting in wide-spread academic growth in these schools. The work of the Educational Trust confirmed the 90/90/90 study, showing that one key to high levels of achievement in low performing schools was the day-to-day use of classroom assessment which included descriptive feedback (Jerald, 2001 as cited in Stiggins and Chappuis, 2005).

Formative assessment can allow teachers to become better instructors. When a group of teachers were given time and training to increase proficiency-based instructional practices, they improved their own questioning techniques, used comment-only marking, provided examples of proficient work from past students, and included student self-assessment of learning gaps. In a sense, formative assessment became an integral part of the learning cycle, where the learning loop was maximized. Wiliam et al. (2004) reflected that for the vast majority of the teachers, involvement in the project has fundamentally altered teachers' views of themselves as professionals.

A key component of formative assessment is student-involved classroom assessment, student-involved record keeping, and student-involved communication (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Mutual communication between teacher and student empowers students and can make teachers more effective (Brookhart et al., 2008). Students can feel empowered in the learning process and thus may become more motivated to reach a goal. Students can be involved in all aspects of proficiency-based instruction, including setting goals for meeting learning destinations, co-constructing criteria, self-assessing mid-way through a unit of instruction, and reflecting on and presenting evidence of learning (Davies, 2007a). Feedback through self-assessment can increase student motivation for learning and is shown to produce substantial learning gains and overall achievement (Ames & Archer, 1988; Black & Wiliam, 1998). When

students are involved in their own assessment, they are required to think about their learning and describe it, which can improve their own learning process.

Research on effective self-assessment suggests that students should be able to answer three basic questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? and How can I close the gap? Numerous studies indicate that students need training to help them self-monitor correctly, but the effort pays off, for student-led learning only improves comprehension, but it increases self-efficacy (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). Conclusive evidence dictates that student-involved classroom assessment is a necessary component of any effective education model, for it results in strong achievement gains and reduced achievement score gaps (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). In sum, teachers can influence motivation and self-regulatory processes in a positive direction by changing their instruction.

An essential component of self-regulated learning is self-efficacy, or “the student’s belief or conviction that he or she can master the material, accomplish the task, or perform the skill that the assignment requires” (Brookhart, 1997, p. 173). When students understand that they are responsible and capable of self-development and self-determination, it can provide the motivation needed for self-regulation (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). Efficacious students demonstrate more effort and persist through challenges. Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence all phases of self-regulation: planning, completion of a task, and self-reflection (B. J. Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009). Teachers can help students increase their self-efficacy by helping students see connections between specific strategies and the end result. If one strategy is not working, teachers should offer a strategy that will work and show the student the exact direction for success (Brookhart et al., 2008). If students believe they can complete a task with success, their cognitive processes can create the motivation to persist through difficulty. One teacher who

transformed her teaching to include more formative assessment witnessed the change in student motivation. She particularly noticed an increase in self-efficacy beliefs:

When students clearly understood our learning objectives, knew precisely what success would look like, understood how each assignment contributed to their success, could articulate the role of assessment in ensuring their success, and understood that their work correlated with their needs, they developed a sense of self-efficacy that was powerful in their lives as learners. Over time, as I developed (my skills at assessment), my students got better at self-monitoring, self-managing, and self-modifying (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 12).

Self-efficacy is not only good for overall self-esteem and productivity in the classroom, but it increases effort and raises student achievement (Brookhart, 1997). As a result, a focus on increasing self-efficacy should be an integral part of sound instructional practices.

In summary, the new model of proficiency-based instruction and grading may offer a strong alternative to traditional grading practices. What comes as a surprise to many teachers and parents is that students engage more productively in improving their work when there are no points or letter grades (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004). It is argued that goal setting and learning targets should be an integral part of the learning process, for it positively impacts the effort toward attainment of proficiencies (B. J. Zimmerman, 2009). There is evidence that enhanced formative assessment produces significant gains in student achievement as measured by state assessment scores, so there is clear evidence that standards-based education could be more successful if it included proficiency-based instructional practices, especially descriptive feedback. In using specific instructional methods which have been shown to increase motivation, teachers can improve self-regulatory processes and self-efficacy beliefs.

Additionally, when students are involved in the assessment process, co-constructing criteria, collecting evidence, monitoring, and reflecting, they achieve at higher levels and motivated to learn more (Davies, 2007b). In reflecting on the literature, it is evident that any study of a new model of instruction, assessment and grading should consider its impact on student motivation and self-regulated learning. Ultimately, any grading model which includes these components may likely have a better chance at increasing student learning.

Challenges to Change

Pockets of reform in assessment and grading are noticeable in scattered districts around the country. While traditional grading systems still dominate the K-12 system, a small minority of districts around the country has started using a standards-based system. In Oregon, for example, as of 2009 only a handful of districts were using standards-based report cards (Oregon Education Roundtable, 2009). The Oregon Proficiency Project, funded by a grant and supported by the University of Washington (Kirk & Acord, 2010), has supported pilot schools and teacher leaders as they move through uncharted territory. Each year more schools and administrators join in the project after hearing positive feedback from piloting districts. As ideas about proficiency-based education move from the academic journals into district agendas and classroom conversations, the voices of change are causing a noticeable shift in beliefs about grading and reporting. At the same time, a majority of K-12 districts are still holding on to traditional models of assessment and grading. “Americans have a basic trust in the message that grades convey –so much so that grades have gone without challenge and are, in fact, highly resistant to any challenge” (Marzano, 2000, p. 1). The ideas of A-F and percentage grading are so integrated into American culture, that there are significant hurdles involved in breaking away from entrenched grading practices.

First, the external mandates embedded in standards-based reform have partially changed the focus of the schools, yet most of the federal reform initiatives are not aimed at giving help and support to the work of teachers in the classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Thus, any change in grading and instructional practices is left up to the whims of individual districts, where few are successful at long-term transformation (Fullan, 2007). A review of the literature (Fullan, 2007) reveals that successful, comprehensive school reform requires overcoming barriers to change, embracing the importance of teachers as learners, and fostering a collaborative culture supported by strong leadership. A re-culturing process must occur, where the school develops shared meaning and promotes capacity building. The current literature (Fullan, 2007; Senge et al., 2000; Stoll et al., 2006) argues for the creation of effective, collaborative cultures which extend school capacity and increase the likelihood of transformational reform. Even with concerted effort that takes into account the current research literature, sustainable reform appears to be an uphill battle.

While there have been considerable innovations over the last 25 years which have made piece-meal improvements to schools, it is difficult to sustain improvement over time and to transform entire educational systems (Stoll et al., 2006). It is recommended that barriers to change must be recognized and challenged. Fear of change and an avoidance of risk can create formidable barriers which limit the opportunity for systemic change. Reeves, a school reformer, has noted a common lack of courage in leaders, board members, citizens, and even teachers who “talk a good game” about improved achievement for students, but they are only willing to pursue transformational reform if it “does not cause discomfort for adults” (Reeves, 2007, p. 9). Those who implement systemic changes in grading practices risk confrontation, isolation, personal attacks, and public humiliation. At the same time, a central job of a school leader is to take a

“fresh inventory of habituated practices” and ask, “what of importance is anyone learning from that policy or practice?” (Barth, 2001, p. 13). Ultimately, courage is required to lead such a profound change in the culture of the school.

Real change can involve anxiety and struggle as the people who are impacted by school reforms pass through levels of uncertainty. Since so many change efforts actually alienate teachers, (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996), it is especially important that district leaders recognize the barriers to change and help teachers overcome them. Failure to understand the need for change, fear of the unknown, perceived threats to their expertise, and previously unsuccessful reform efforts are key barriers which contribute to a teacher’s unwillingness to engage in reform (J. Zimmerman, 2006). In addition, teachers feel the critical shortage of time, which draws their focus to day-to-day management. The hectic pace of current school environments exhausts their energy, isolates them, and limits opportunities for reflection (Fullan, 2007). Overall, the working conditions of teachers limit their opportunities to become innovative.

Cynical teachers can pose a huge barrier to what they see as the “latest flavor” in school reform. Educators often speak of external challenges to learning such as poverty and nutrition. However, educators must equally be cognizant of internal challenges, including “long-held traditions that elevate personal preference over evidence” (Reeves, 2007, p. 2). One of these long-held traditions is the notion of the bell curve and norm-referenced grading. When teachers get defensive that the bell curve is the best method for grading, this can be countered with examples that go against their assumptions. For example, in most professions, people are evaluated against an established standard of performance. Pilots, doctors, cooks, mechanics and countless others are held to a standard of excellence. Additionally, when training for these professions, students and new employees are given multiple opportunities to practice before they

enter the field (Reeves, 2007). Logically, this calls into the question that norm-referenced grading mirrors the real world. This example shows how a key barrier to reform is the assumptions that teachers carry with them and believe to be “true” because the status quo has existed for so long.

An important barrier to change is external stakeholders, like parents, whose support is vital for implementation to move forward. Reformers spend so much time planning that they often fail to take into account the hurdles which must be addressed in the implementation phase. “The fundamental flaw in most innovators’ strategies is that they focus on their innovations, on what they are trying to do –rather than understanding how the larger culture, structures and norms will react to their efforts” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 26). People often resist for what they view as good reasons, so policymakers would benefit from communicating with the external stakeholders and building trust in the community if they want a better chance for successful implementation of a new program. Conflict and disagreement should be expected, resulting in an implementation dip at the first implementation stages (Fullan, 2007).

The A-F, percentage grading system is so embedded in the definition of a school that one can expect parent resistance to change (Marzano, 2000). In fact, Olsen (1995) reports that early attempts to try out standards-based report cards were met with strong resistance from parents:

At issue is one of the most sacred traditions in American education: the use of letter grades to denote student achievement. The truth is that letter grades have acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools. They are the primary, shorthand tool for communicating to parents how children are faring. Without them, there would be no honor rolls or class valedictorian. Get a good grade, and Grandpa will be proud. Get a bad grade, and kids know not to talk

about it much. Schools use letter grades to signal whether children have mastered their subjects, to select groups for educational courses and programs, to motivate and reward students, and to help youngsters and their parents understand where performance needs to be improved. To trifle with grades, as Cranston educators learned, is to attack one of the most basic notions about schooling and competition in America. (Olson, 1995, p. 24)

Olsen cites examples of schools who were pioneers in trying a standards-based report card, without letter grades, and it resulted in a huge backlash from parents. In one district, parents circulated a petition and attempted to get the A-F system returned. They felt comfortable with the old system, claiming that they “knew” what the letter grades meant. Ironically, those same parents really did not understand what criteria were being used to decide the letter grade in the old system.

There is a common belief that teachers do not change, when in fact there is considerable research that they change all the time (Richardson, 2003). They experiment with new learning activities in the classroom, they try out new curriculum to see what works and what does not work, they absorb new innovations while rejecting others. However, the individualistic and isolated environment of teaching often pervades the way teachers think about change. Since collaboration is not always encouraged or supported, teachers sometimes feel they need to make independent decisions on what is best for their classroom. Rather than succumbing to an environment where individual teachers tinker with change, school leaders can encourage a collective sense of goals and instructional approaches (Richardson, 2003). However, leaders should help teachers see the value in a collective approach to change and realize how shared learning can improve the whole professional community.

One hurdle in the reform process is the lack of quality professional development for teachers. Research on teacher perceptions indicates that teachers sometimes view professional development as ineffective and wasteful (Fullan, 2007). Fullan cites several studies that showed how innovations stay on the surface because they are introduced in short, professional development sessions that do not provide opportunities for deeper questioning and sustained learning. As a result, “meaningful reform escapes the typical teacher, in favor of superficial, episodic reform that makes matters worse” (Fullan, 2007, p. 28). These negative experiences tend to hamper reform efforts even further. The more negative experiences with previous implementation attempts, the more cynical and noncompliant teachers will be when new reforms are initiated, regardless of the merit of the new idea or program.

The importance of personal initiative in the reform process keeps coming up in the literature. It has been argued that school cultures cannot be changed from without; they need to be changed from within (Barth, 2001). Even then, when the change comes from within, innovations will not be long term unless the culture itself is changed. It’s what Barth calls superficial window dressing, incapable of making a transformative difference in the way the school operates. Above all, teachers want to be inspired. It can be said that if one takes the heart out of teaching, they get compliance but little else (Barth, 2001).

Challenging the status quo of the traditional school environment requires rigorous action sustained over several years to change the culture of the classroom and the school. Large-scale reform failed in the past because innovations ignored the culture of the schools (Fullan, 2007). Cultures do not change by mandates. Rather, the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modeling new values and behaviors (Ellmore, 2004). Large-scale reform is about shared meaning, which means that it involves individual and social change simultaneously

(Fullan, 2007). According to Rosenholtz (1989), schools which had shared meaning were continuously improving, while schools that were stuck had environments where teachers felt isolated and believed they had to deal with classroom challenges on their own. Additionally, it is important to remember that some schools have a higher proportion of change-orientated teachers than do others (Fullan, 2007), so it might take longer to transform a school from a learning-impooverished environment to a learning-enriched environment (Rosenholtz, 1989).

A focus of recent research has been on capacity building, which is “a policy, strategy, or action taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of people working individually and together” (Fullan, 2007, p. 58). Fullan argues that capacity building should come first in school reform, because this is what tends to motivate more people. Capacity is a complex blend of “motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 221). In effect, capacity provides school communities the power for sustainable reform. International evidence shows that successful implementation of school reform depends on teachers’ collective capacity and its link with school-wide capacity for increasing student learning (Stoll et al., 2006). Therefore, any efforts to improve schools will need to focus on capacity building. Principals and other school leaders can have a critical role in bolstering school capacity to address student needs (Waldron & Mcleskey, 2010). A fundamental way to bolster school capacity may be in developing a collaborative school culture.

A key finding in recent literature relates to the critical role of collaboration in the school change process (Waldron & Mcleskey, 2010). The collaborative change process results in new values, beliefs and norms which can re-culture the school. Collaborative activities like joint

problem solving, data analysis, shared decision making, and sharing knowledge can add value to change initiatives and create an environment where sustained reform is possible. A collaborative school culture may lead to higher levels of trust and respect among colleagues, improved instructional practices, and better achievement outcomes for students (Waldron & Mcleskey, 2010). As teachers learn from others and share expertise, it can result in high quality professional development rather than short-term fixes to problems. A collaborative school culture can take years to develop (Fullan, 2007), but the payoff is usually more effective schools and sustainable school reform. High-quality professional development activities provide evidence that the re-culturing process is underway.

If a significant factor determining whether students learn well is teaching quality (Hord, 2008), then ideally, a collaborative school culture should include the goal of improving teacher quality and effectiveness. Peers helping peers by sharing the wisdom of practice has a tremendous, positive impact on teaching practices (Shulman, 2004). However, the way in which professional development is organized substantially impacts how effective it is. Traditional forms of professional development have been proven to be largely ineffective, for they focus on a one-shot training in a large group setting:

Indeed, most of the staff development that is conducted with K-12 teachers derives from the short-term transmission model; pays no attention to what is already going on in a particular classroom, school or school district; offers little opportunity for participants to become involved in the conversation; and provides no follow up. (Richardson, 2003, p. 401)

One study concluded that only about 5-10% of teachers use practices that were presented in traditional forms of professional development (Waldron & Mcleskey, 2010). Moreover,

professional development opportunities are often intermittent, resulting in a lack of on-going training for teachers (Austin & McCann, 1992).

It is argued that not only should districts allocate more time set aside for teacher training, but the format would improve if teachers were in the center of their learning (Shulman, 2004). Surely, professional development would be strengthened if the format moved away from teachers as passive recipients of knowledge to teachers as active collaborators in improving their professional practice. Districts are ignoring a vital knowledge base, which is the hard-worn insights of teachers and school personal who have been in the trenches for years, something Barth calls *craft knowledge* (2001, p. 56). This craft knowledge tends to be an inch wide and a mile deep, but it can provide specialists who can become teacher leaders in their particular field or expertise.

Some districts are finally beginning to see the value in encouraging teachers to work together to improve instruction (Hord, 2008). Professional learning communities are emerging in school districts as schools examine instructional practices in the wake of standards-based reform. Professional learning communities (PLC) are broadly defined as “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). Whole communities benefit from learning together to take charge of change, so PLCs can promote the change process by seeking and sharing learning. There are groups which call themselves PLCs which remain traditional communities that reinforce current practice. However, Little (1993) has claimed that true PLCs are a teacher learning community that focuses on growth, self-examination, and improved practice. In addition, an ethic of caring should permeate the PLC to build trust and meaningful relationships (Stoll et al., 2006). Teachers will need to allow

themselves to be vulnerable in admitting where they are struggling and be willing to ask for help from trusted colleagues in the group.

Developing professional learning communities has become integral to the discussions on school reform because of their promise for building school capacity. A review of the literature on professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006) finds that there are five key features which are intertwined and work together to create a successful community:

- A shared sense of vision and purpose that all the members share
- Collective responsibility for student learning which sustains commitments and holds members accountable
- Reflective professional inquiry which includes dialogue, shared reflection and problem-solving
- Collaboration that fosters feelings of interdependence
- Group, as well as individual learning, is promoted; this includes collective knowledge creation

This does not mean that PLCs are conflict-free. In fact, difference, debate and disagreement can be viewed as a pathway to improvement, as long as all members in the group provide trust and equality. Respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity are elements of relational trust which are essential for a strong professional community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The principal is a key partner in developing relational trust by demonstrating it and fostering a culture in where relationships are trusted (Stoll et al., 2006), thus reinforcing the culture of the PLC.

Although PLCs are a relatively new topic for researchers, recent evidence links PLCs to increased work efficacy, an increased knowledge base, and a significant, positive impact on

classroom environments (Rosenholtz, 1989; Stoll et al., 2006). Rosenholtz (1989) found that a learning-enriched workplace can be linked to better academic progress of students. This research was confirmed a decade later by Louis and Marks (1998), who found that students achieve at higher levels in school with collaborative cultures such as PLCs. This was explained by a stronger teacher focus on pedagogy, reflective dialogue, and higher-quality thinking. Ultimately, these communities create a culture of practice and a shared vision which drives reform throughout the school environment.

Even though writers, researchers, and educational organizations have all endorsed the concept of the professional learning community, the concept will likely have little impact on schools unless PLC practices become embedded into day-to-day school culture (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Transforming a school to function as a professional learning community requires much more than a superficial understanding of the concept. Leaders will need to embrace an intentional process to impact the culture. “Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that the organization finds meaning and stability” (Schlechty, 1997, p. 136). Eaker and Keating (2008) identify three shifts that change the culture of a school from traditional professional development to collaborative communities: a) teams or PLCs shift in fundamental purpose from teaching to learning; b) shifting from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaborative teams; c) a shift in focus from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results. When teachers make collaborative commitments in their schools, the result can be a powerful transformation in behavior, which ultimately, can change the school culture (Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

Bunker (2008) used a mixed methods study to analyze the effectiveness of professional learning communities. The author found that teacher skill in the collaborative process correlated

significantly with student achievement in reading and math. Additionally, teachers reported that the collaborative process resulted in increased confidence and professionalism, and overall, they were enthusiastic about continuing the PLCs. One significant barrier to change was personality conflicts or resistance of members in the group who had negative attitudes. One significant factor in a successful PLC was the trust and support of team members. In a similar study, Montgomery (2007) found differences in teacher and principal perceptions regarding support offered for PLCs. The teachers reported needing more communication, more time built into the regular school day, and a plan for turnover and re-training of staff. They also asked for more formal training in formative assessments and cited a lack of district support for teacher collaboration.

Montgomery's (2007) study reveals an important dynamic in the change process: the principal. Recent research has confirmed that the principal is not only important, but central to the success of systemic reform (Fullan, 2007). Additionally, leaders developing leaders can be a crucial factor to build school capacity and buttress the re-culturing process, in that leaders need to create other leaders in their building who can keep momentum moving toward continuous improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Since collaborative cultures are fundamental to the change process, principals are responsible for making time and allocating resources for this to happen. If principals embrace distributed leadership, teachers can be provided with opportunities to take on roles which can influence the change process. The literature also concludes that schools need to be organized to allow time for teachers to collaborate (Stoll et al., 2006). The principal can prioritize time for staff to meet and talk regularly, which shows a commitment to the collective culture of the school.

In his study of positive organizations, Quinn (2004) has found that at the heart of productive communities is an extraordinary leader whose creative personal state gives rise to a creative collective state. Instead of denying the need for change, these leaders recognize the signals which call for courage and growth. When guiding transformation into a new, unknown organizational identity, these leaders go through a personal transformation which causes positive ripples through the entire community. Transformational leaders commit to a vision of what the organization can become, and they build the bridge of reform as they walk on it. Rather being on self-interested journeys, transformational leaders enter what Quinn (2004) calls the *fundamental state of leadership*, which is purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused, and externally open. When leaders make deep change at a personal level, they see a different world, behave differently, and thus the world around them reacts differently. Quinn also emphasizes that quality leaders have *adaptive confidence*, which is the faith to move forward into uncertainty, knowing that through continuous movement and openness to feedback, the organization will move in the right direction. Even though Quinn's studies apply to all organizations, schools engaged in reform could benefit from the type of leader in which Quinn describes.

Research concludes that the lack of support from the building administrator is a significant barrier to collaborative professional development (Waldron & Mcleskey, 2010). Leaders can sometimes allow the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000), which is the gap between what we know and what we do. As a school leader, it is easier to accept the status quo than to lead the change necessary to create productive communities (Quinn, 2004). After examining the research, Fullan (2007) concluded that "all major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change, but it also indicates that most principals do not play instructional or change leadership roles" (p. 95).

Since numerous studies on change reveal that the change process is a dynamic one that requires strong, supportive leadership (Lawrenz et al., 2005), it is evident that any studies on the process of school reform should examine the role of the principal and other building leaders in the change process.

Not only is the *amount* of time critical for school reform, but the *pacing* of change should be considered as well. In a study of teachers who were trained and then implemented formative assessment techniques (Black et al., 2004), the teachers found that it required a complete change to the classroom culture. Learning became student centered and not teacher-centered, which was unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable. At times, teachers reported that that process was scary because they felt like they may lose control of the classroom. The study recommended starting with smaller steps and one or two strategies, and then slowly expanding to cover the whole of instructional practices. Collaboration and support with a peer group was essential to ease fears and overcoming initial uncertainties (Black et al., 2004).

Reasonable pacing increases the chances of buy-in from teacher, but it needs to be supported by training to provide skill development. In one case study (William et al., 2004) where an intervention to create more formative assessments in the classroom dramatically improved student achievement, the teachers in the study were given six months of training and support. The authors of the study emphasized that changes of this nature are relatively slow, and the changes are hard to implement even in ideal conditions (William et al., 2004). In another study, Lawrenz et al (2005) found that this amount of change requires teacher participation, a great deal of training, and most importantly, a feedback loop so that teachers can have dialogue on what worked, what did not work and why. The authors concluded that participants should have the formal times set aside to have dialogue regarding implementation and how to continue

after initial implementation is over. In addition, the Lawrenz study revealed how crucial it is that teachers take on ownership of the new instructional practices. In this case, change that was viewed as a top-down mandate, put upon teachers by the principal or the school board, was a failure.

While there is substantial literature on the reform process, leadership factors, and collaborative cultures, literature on the transition from traditional grading systems to standards-based systems is virtually non-existent. The Oregon Proficiency Project (OPP), funded by the University of Washington, has gathered data from teachers, principals and students on how proficiency-based practices have transformed instruction in a positive direction. The OPP created a DVD documenting a case study of how language arts teachers transformed their practices in an Oregon high school (Oregon Business Council, 2010). The focus was on training of teachers and the principal, and it included student testimonies of how they felt this new system improved their learning. However, the DVD does not address the transition process itself, barriers to change, or the re-culturing of the school.

The literature does include various personal testimonies of teachers who made the transition to standards-based grading and concluded that this new system is an improvement over traditional grading practices. Three teachers in a Michigan middle school documented how the switch to standards-based grading transformed their whole conception of the meaning and purpose of grades: “The long hours we’ve invested in this have been exhausting and frustrating, yet energizing and eye-opening. We have never considered returning to our outdated grading practices” (Deddeh, Main, & Fulkerson, 2010, p. 58). In another example, a team of science teachers discussed the transformation in their grading and recordkeeping that allowed them to

measure student learning in a more authentic manner. The team also noted a considerable difference in student motivation after moving to the new model:

Students said that they understood more, focused more on learning important concepts, and were more relaxed because the teacher judged their performance on the basis of their understanding. One immediate, if unanticipated, outcome was the change in classroom atmosphere. Students became more engaged in monitoring their own learning. They repeatedly asked for clarification, from their peers and from the teacher, to ensure their understanding. (Clymer & Wiliam, 2007, p. 41)

In yet another example, a high school teacher argued the merits of moving to a standards-based model, such as having homework directly support learning targets, adjusting instruction to fill gaps in learning, and involving students in goal setting to meet proficiency goals (Scriffiny, 2008). These three examples are just a few of the myriad articles that have been published in support of moving to the proficiency model. While together they provide evidence in support of a standards-based grading model and proficiency-based instruction, the transformation of individual teachers is far different from school-wide reform.

A few dissertations were found which came close to the research focus of this dissertation. Eckersley (1997) studied the implementation of the PASS project (Proficiency-based Admission Standards System) at three Oregon high schools with the focus on school restructuring to address standards-based reform. The dissertation is dated, but since the PASS project was the precursor to today's proficiency-based instruction and included mastery learning as its focus, it documented the change from traditional grading practices to a mastery learning model. The qualitative case studies of three schools concluded that the culture of the schools

was a significant factor in the success of implementation, the opportunities to collaborate with colleagues was instrumental in reform efforts, and principal leadership was crucial to move the change forward. Overall, the active participation of teachers enabled a bottom-up reform that was essential for broad-based implementation, and the teachers viewed proficiency-based instruction as promising for a more accurate depiction of student achievement.

A more timely study is research by Tracy (2005), in which a case study examined a group of mathematics teachers who collaborated in developing standards-based grading and reporting methods. The focus of the study was more on final grading and reporting, but it did reveal the challenges of communicating to parents a new system of grading. It also depicted the difficult position of being the teacher who is different while the rest of the school still uses traditional grading practices. The study also revealed the importance of a knowledge base for teachers and on-going training where teachers could collaborate as they worked to improve grading practices. Ultimately, only two teachers in the study fully embraced the new grading paradigm. While the study only involved a team of teachers and not the whole school, it revealed barriers to implementation and teacher perceptions of the new model.

The continuation and institutionalization of reforms is a significant challenge in education. Only a small percentage of schools see transformational change in their buildings which lasts past the first few years of implementation (Fullan, 2007). Some factors that influence the continuation of reforms is if the change 1) gets embedded into the structure; 2) has generated a critical mass of support because the teachers and administrators are skilled in the new practices; and 3) has support systems in place to assist new teachers and administrators (Fullan, 2007). Very few programs plan for the in-service support for new members who arrive after the program has started. Since the implementation of new teaching practices take several

years, the district will need to support the change all the way through the process and not abandon it (Lawrenz et al., 2005).

Another issue which comes up is the external impact of state or federal reforms, like the recent high-stakes testing and accountability, which detract from the real work that is going on to change the classroom environment to promote authentic learning. Datnow and Stringfield (2000) found that the interrelations at the federal, state and local level, at various points in time, shaped the way in which reforms succeeded or failed. For long-lasting reform, both internal and external factors will need to align into a critical mass, bringing together various stakeholders who embrace the same vision, focus, and direction for the district. Fullan concludes, “So, now we know why implementation and continuation are so difficult” (2007, p. 105).

Gaps in the Research

There are numerous, unexplored gaps in the research on standards-based grading models and proficiency-based instructional methods. First, further research is needed on the impact of removing A-F descriptors and points on student motivation and the learning environment. Research is also lacking on teacher, student, and parent perceptions of moving away from traditional grading systems and what key barriers exist that limit the implementation of a new model. Although there are scattered testimonies of individual teachers who moved to the model, the research lacks comprehensive studies of schools and school districts that have transitioned to grading based on proficiency of learning targets. Qualitative studies are needed on teacher perceptions of how proficiency-based instruction has impacted the learning environment, and how motivation, self-regulated learning, and self-efficacy change as a result of proficiency-based instruction. Perhaps most important, research is needed to evaluate the factors which have led to successful implementation of the new grading model. District leaders, principals, and teachers

could provide valuable insights to the research literature on school reform in the area of grading and assessment.

Conclusion

An in-depth study of the literature on grading and assessments reveals a push by measurement experts toward standards-based grading models that use the concepts of mastery learning and criterion-referenced grading. Traditional grading systems, which have been entrenched in American schools for a century, are highly criticized for their arbitrary nature and inconsistencies. As evidenced by a small number of school districts who are at the forefront of school reform in grading practices, standards-based grading systems are taking a foothold in scattered places throughout America. Intertwined with standards-based grading are the theories of proficiency-based instruction, which are shown to improve student motivation and self-regulation through the use of learning targets, rubrics, formative assessments, and descriptive feedback. Student participation in goal setting and self-assessment is deemed essential to effective instruction under this model.

The review of recent literature on school reform shows that any study which involves the transformation to a systemic-wide grading model should take into account the barriers to change, the building capacity, the “re-culturing” process, the role of principals and teacher leaders, and the existence of collaborative cultures. The true measure of this study is not just to evaluate if standards-based grading is a better model, but ultimately, is this large-scale reform possible and sustainable? What will it take to create an extensive, cultural shift in the collective beliefs about grading and assessment? What are the factors that will allow other districts to have potential for a successful transition? One can write prolifically about theory, but the ultimate test is to see if that theory can be transferred successfully into practice.

If proficiency-based grading systems are supported by the research literature, then school districts need to gain a better understanding of the transition process and also the factors by which sustainable reform can be possible. In addition, advocates of a proficiency-based grading model will need to provide evidence that this model improves student learning and achievement if they hope for the model to gain acceptance in the larger community. This is a critical and timely topic for study, in that districts are currently allocating funds to ascertain the possibility of moving to this new paradigm of grading, and there is much debate among teachers as to if this is just the latest fad in school reform, or if it is something that will transform their profession. In sum, this research aims to separate the hype from the truth to support districts and teachers along their path to continuous improvement.

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

The literature reviews lends support to a shift away from traditional grading systems and toward a standards-based grading model that is embedded in proficiency-based instructional practices. Experts in education argue that the standards-based model provides a more authentic grade that reflects attainment of learning targets and that the instructional practices embedded in this model improve motivation, self-regulation skills and overall achievement for the students. This study was designed to explore the transition to this new model of grading and to investigate the impact on the teachers, the learning environment and the school culture. At the same time, this study provided a clearer picture of the transitional process and could provide direction for other districts considering this model. The study also evaluated to what extent the re-culturing process has taken place and ascertained if collective cultures have supported reform efforts, ultimately offering evidence if the recent reform efforts in the school under examination will succeed or fail. Specifically, the research questions focused on the barriers to change, the factors that enabled successful implementation of the new model, and teacher perceptions of how the learning environment has changed as a result of using proficiency-based practices.

Research Questions

- 1) What do teachers and school leaders perceive to be the most significant challenges related to change in transitioning from a traditional grading system to a proficiency-based grading model?
- 2) What factors were cited by teachers and leaders as fostering the implementation of proficiency-based instructional and grading practices in a suburban school district?

- 3) What changes in the learning environment have teachers experienced in adopting proficiency-based instructional practices within their classrooms?

Setting

The school district under study is the third largest school district in the state of Oregon. It serves over 38,000 students, and the district has grown 15.5% in the last 10 years (Beaverton School District, 2009). The district's mission statement is that "All students will show continuous progress toward their personal learning goals, developed in collaboration with teachers and parents, and will be prepared for post-secondary education and career success" (Beaverton School District, 2009). To attain this goal, this District committed to switch over to standards-based grading which integrates proficiency-based instructional practices. This system is known as the *Proficiency Learning System*, with implementation to beginning at the middle school level in 2009. It is a grading system where specific learning targets are identified and measured for every student, and the intention is that every assignment and assessment matches to the specific learning target to be mastered. On assignments and tests, instead of ratings such as A, B, C, D, F or assigning a point value, feedback uses the words *Highly Proficient*, *Proficient*, *Nearly Proficient*, *Working Towards*, or *Novice*. In the middle school, classroom proficiency grades are changed into letter grades for final reporting. The teacher is allowed discretion as to the process used for deciding how the grade is determined, but district policy requires that the final grade be based on evidence of achievement of learning targets, and that non-achievement factors only minimally impact the grade.

In the last decade, high schools in this same district under study have been actively involved in transforming their instructional practices. The impetus for change came both from teachers and administrators who believed that changes were needed to current grading practices.

Reform started from the ground up, meaning teacher leaders advocated change in grading methods, and then it also involved some key leaders who had a vision of embracing criterion-referenced grading. The idea caught on at the middle schools, and soon the middle school principals and teacher leaders became strong advocates of changing their grading systems. With the help of a grant from the Nike School Innovation Fund, money was available for extensive teacher training to increase the knowledge base needed to break the inertia of traditional grading practices. In 2008-09, all middle school teachers in this district attended an Assessment Literacy Conference and devoted all in-service days to aligning their curriculum to specific learning targets and determining proficiency at each level.

In the fall of 2009, all middle school teachers aligned their instruction, assessment and grading to the Proficiency Learning System. With the support of the IT department in creating code that would allow grading software to allow standards-based reporting language, starting in 2009 the middle schools reported progress of students in terms of proficiency rather than points or letter grades, except for the final grade, which continued to be reported as A-F. All middle schools in this district are somewhere along the process of reform, and the district has had to deal with community backlash as well as teacher concerns about implementation hurdles. With two years under the new system, the transition was still fresh in the minds of teachers but was far enough along to study the transition process and changes to the classroom environment.

The school under study received school board approval to eliminate letter grades for final reporting beginning with the 2011-12 school year. It was a pilot program that was unique to this school. The school board plans to review the pilot program after three years and consider implementing these same changes throughout all of its middle schools. At the time of publication, the school will be continuing the pilot in the 2012-13 school year, and this school

will still be the only middle school in the district to report grades by proficiency scores rather than A-F descriptors.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The participants in the case study are from one school that will be called Middle School One (MS1). The school chosen has been the leader of the pack in the transition to proficiency grading and has moved farther along in the implementation process than the other middle schools. There are 43 certified teachers with an enrollment of 723 students in grades 6-8. This school also houses the Summa program for highly capable students. These students have scored in the 99th percentile on a test of cognitive ability and/or in both reading and math achievement tests. Five males and nine females agreed to be interviewed for the study. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, the average years of teaching experience was 15 years, with the least experience being four years and the longest experience being 31 years. Two teachers taught math, three taught science, two taught humanities, two taught electives, and one teacher taught physical education. Within these areas, one teacher was in special education, one had intervention classes for struggling students, and two were part of the Summa program for highly capable students. Of the four administrators interviewed, all had been teachers previously and had moved into administration. These four participants had an average of six years in administration, with the least experience being two years and the longest experience being 13 years.

Initially, stratified random sampling was used to interview teachers from different content areas and grade levels. Teachers were randomly asked to participate after the staff list was divided up by subject area. Also, all of the teachers selected had been in the building since 2009 to make sure that they were present when implementation of the new program began. After the first round of interviews, purposive and snowball sampling enabled me to balance out the

interviews and make sure the various teams in the building had at least one person who was interviewed. Ten teacher interviews were completed, nine in person and one through an email of answers. The current principal and vice principal were interviewed, but the past principal who led the reform efforts was not available. Interviews with two district curriculum leaders, one past and one present, rounded out the research. In total, 14 interviews were completed for the study.

The personal interviews each took about 35-45 minutes to complete, a few lasting over one hour. The interviews were semi-structured and generally followed a list of questions (see Appendix A). There were three or four questions connected to each of the three research questions that attempted to look at the question from different angles. I asked additional follow up questions for clarification depending on how the first question was answered. One question was added for the second round of interviews pertaining to the idea of why they think their school is ahead in the reform process. The administrator questions were similar but slightly changed to match their role in the building or district (see Appendices B and C). The interviews were then transcribed, and I re-read each of them for accuracy.

Research Design

This investigation used qualitative methods and a case study approach, which appeared to be the best method to examine in-depth the process of transformation within the building and to understand teacher perceptions through stories and descriptions of how their classroom environments have changed. Berg (2009) defines a case study approach as “a method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular persona, social setting, event, or group to permit the research to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (p. 317). After developing 10 interview questions, I piloted the questions with a teacher who is

doing proficiency-based instruction in this school district but who is not at this school. I then refined the questions to ensure that they would be a means to answering the three research questions. I also modified the questions for the administrators and district leaders to match their role and leader perspective.

A second component of the investigation utilized existing data found through district surveys and online state assessment data. With the existing data, I had online access to state assessments in math and reading. The surveys and written comments collected and reported by Pacific Research and Evaluation (2011) as part of the Nike grant provided additional, district-wide quantitative and qualitative data on all eight middle schools.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

The 14 interviews began in November 2001 and were completed by the end of January 2012, consisting of a first round using stratified random sampling and the second round using purposive and snowball sampling. Each interview was transcribed and then re-checked for accuracy. Using the coding frames of open and axial coding, I organized the interview data to look for patterns to see what findings emerged from that data for each of the three research questions. For the first research question, I created a table to indicate what challenges were noted in each interview and compared it to the common challenges to change list created from the literature. For the second and third research questions, I looked at key words and concepts that emerged from the answers and then grouped and prioritized them by prevalence in the answers.

The data collected by Pacific Research and Evaluation had survey data which was already analyzed and also raw qualitative data in the form of written comments that were answers to specific questions. For research question number three, I was able to code the district

qualitative data using open and axial coding and compare it to the interview data. Key words and concepts were counted and compared to the interview data. The data on state test scores were collected in the fall of 2011 off the Oregon Department of Education website. In addition, the principal of the school provided me with OAKS data that showed growth by recent cohorts. The purpose was to create descriptive statistics and compare test scores two years prior to implementation to the two years since implementation.

Since this is a case study, the focus was on theory-building by looking for patterns in the data and commonalities in the interviews. Additionally, I was looking to see if the interviews either lent support to or refuted the theoretical push toward proficiency-based practices and standards-based grading, while offering insights to the factors which allow for a successful transition to the new model.

Human Subjects Safeguarding

Social Science researchers must protect their research participants from intentional harm when conducting research. All George Fox University human subjects safeguarding protocols were followed while this research study was conducted. First, I obtained informed consent from participants who completed the one-on-one interviews. I also give a printed copy to each participant that explains the intent of the research and to emphasize that all answers will remain confidential. I also verbally assured participants that their answers were confidential and asked them to be honest. All interviews were audio-taped for transcription at a later date. No real names are used in the dissertation, and the school name will be kept anonymous. I also signed a statement of confidentiality which will remain with the records. All documentation from the interviews will be destroyed within three years of the publication of the research. Until that time they will be locked away in a separate location from the data.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

This case study was designed to explore how one school implemented a new grading and instructional model, called the *Proficiency Learning System* by the district under study. After two years of teacher training and preparation in the 2007-2009 school years, implementation of the new grading model started in 2009 and has become integrated into the school culture. Using the larger umbrella of school reform, the personal interviews gathered data on the challenges to change and the factors which allowed implementation to move forward. In addition, the study looked at teacher perceptions as to how their classroom environments had changed since implementation of proficiency-based practices. Fourteen interviews combined with existing data provided valuable means to formulate a clear picture of the transition process and changes to the classroom environment at this school.

The following three research questions became the focus of this study:

Research question #1: What do teachers and school leaders perceive to be the most significant challenges related to change in transitioning from a traditional grading system to a proficiency-based grading model?

Research question #2: What factors were cited by teachers and leaders as fostering the implementation of proficiency-based instructional and grading practices in a suburban school district?

Research Question #3: What changes in the learning environment have teachers experienced in adopting proficiency-based instructional practices within their classrooms?

Challenges to Change

The first research question examined challenges to the transition process from traditional grading over to proficiency-based education. Participants were given a list of common barriers to school reform (Figure 1) and asked to identify any that they had personally experienced during the first two years of implementation. The list was derived from barriers to change noted in current literature, and participants were told they could identify challenges that were not on the list. Coding of the data revealed several challenges to change in the process of moving toward a proficiency-based system. The most significant challenges identified by district leaders, teachers, and school administrators were a shortage of time and inadequate technology. Other moderate concerns included increased job requirements, challenges by external stakeholders, and comfort with tradition. Fear of the unknown, lack of professional development, lack of leadership, and negativity about previously unsuccessful reform efforts were only occasionally mentioned.

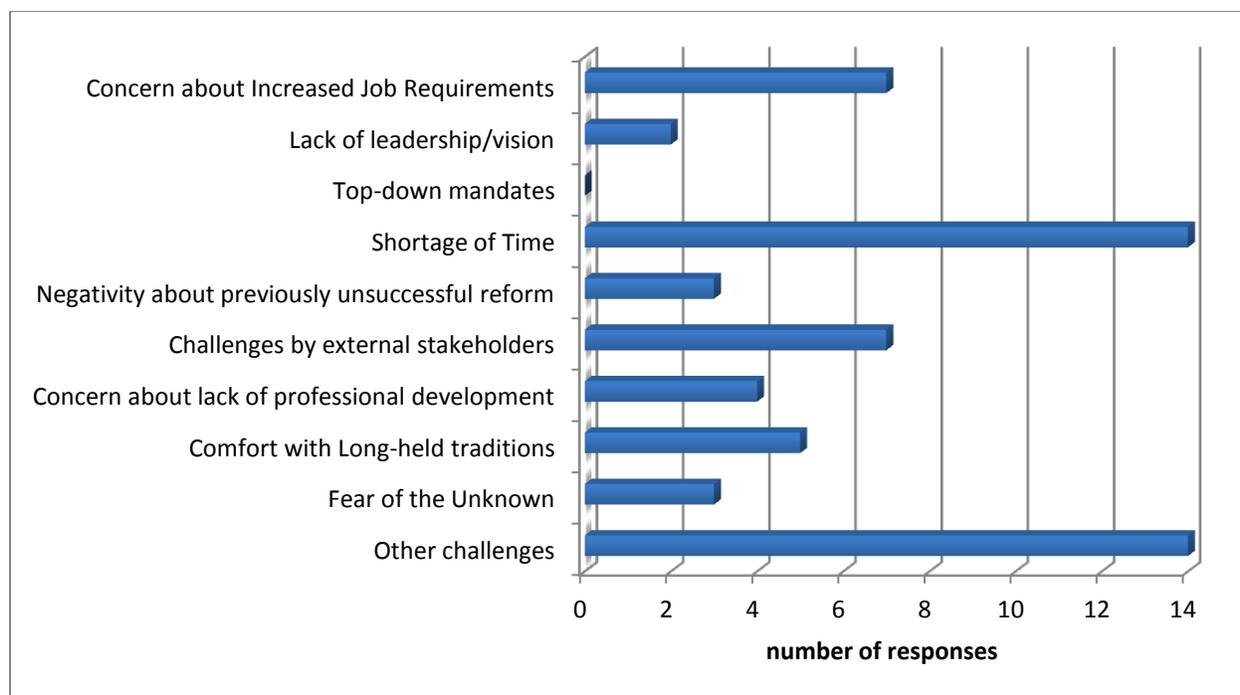


Figure 1. Challenges to change (n=14).

Shortage of time.

One of the most significant challenges identified by participants was the shortage of time allotted to make transformational changes in teaching, assessments, and reporting. In fact, all teachers and administrators who were interviewed commented about the gap between the time allotted to teachers and the time actually needed to make such significant changes in curriculum and assessment. Every teacher interviewed mentioned shortage of time as a concern, especially during that first transition year. Five out the ten teachers described that first year as quite overwhelming. For example, P3 found that trying to completely transform her curriculum and assessments when she was given the same amount of planning time became “way overwhelming.” P4 remembers, “When (the principal) unrolled this plan a week before school started, and we all raised our hands in agreement to support proficiency, it was a big shock. Our kids were coming a week later, and the new assessments weren’t all in place yet.” The Proficiency Learning System required student-friendly learning targets, formative assessments, and rubric grading, and some changes were not yet in place when the school year started. A considerable amount of work was required initially to move over to the new grading system, which involved instructional changes as well as different reporting methods. One teacher, P5, remembers how stressful it was that first year to try and re-write curriculum before and after school:

Our school schedule didn’t give us, and still does not give us, enough time to collaborate together with our peers, not like the other middle schools. We are all saying that we need more time, time to sit down with those in our content area, time to evaluate student work, or come up with learning targets that are more specific than the state standards.

Even though all teachers mentioned a shortage of time as an issue, the interviews revealed that participants who were given additional training before the transition, as well as those who already used rubric grading, were able to cope better in the early months of the transition. P12, who was on numerous planning committees and already used rubrics as her main assessment method, said she was very familiar with the direction the district was taking. “It’s similar to the type of grading I do anyway. It’s project-based, all based on criteria. The only change was re-naming the categories.” P5, a teacher leader who received additional training before the transition, recognizes that the first year was easier for her than it was for others. She admitted,

Some teachers didn’t have the professional development that I did, so it took more time for them that first year to deal with all that change. I have felt comfortable about it all along, and my extra time is spent working with teachers to support them.

P5 wondered if the pace was too fast for those who didn’t have all the extra training that the teacher leaders were given. Teachers with less training had to take a big leap and get on board quickly.

Even teacher leaders who had more training found a shortage of time in trying to support others in their building who were trying to make the needed changes. P10 was a facilitator at another school before moving over to her current school, and she found it quite challenging to offer the support needed in the time allowed:

It takes a lot more time to do something new. You have to learn it first and then implement it. Although I received quite a bit of professional development, a lot of other people did not. I was getting paid as a facilitator to help them, but the

amount of time I was given was lacking, and so I was meeting one-on-one with them during their plan periods or after school, so it took a lot of time, and on top of it I was learning it at the same time, so it was a huge time commitment just to make it happen.

The school used in this case study was able to secure two, half-time facilitator positions to offer extra support to teachers. One of these facilitators, P4, said that during this time she meets in a team to create staff development, tackle issues, and create school-wide goal setting activities. She also meets one-on-one with teachers during their prep periods to assist with transforming their practice. She reflected, “Even though I was ready to switch to the new grading system, the rest of the staff was blind-sided; the ball was rolling and they had to catch up. They need support on the day-to-day changes.”

Four out of 10 teachers specifically mentioned how grading takes up significantly more time in a proficiency-based system. P6 feels that grading takes longer at the end of the quarter. P7 agreed, saying that “We don’t just hit a button and submit grades.” P7 added, “I would say the biggest thing is time. Grading takes longer, there are so many pieces. I spend a lot of time at home grading and giving feedback to students.” Changing proficiency grades to letter grades at the end of the quarter was quite tedious and time-consuming, and it seemed to defeat the purpose of doing proficiency scores. P7 stated,

We have all talked about how much time it takes at the end of the grading period to input grades. It’s better now that we are not also doing letter grades, but summative judgments are so different than having a computer calculate percentages.

This school also reports behavior as a separate category, so it is one additional step in reporting that has to be done at the end of the trimester.

One area where teachers identified that they needed more time was in rubric development. Four teachers specifically mentioned problems with the district-created rubrics. The teachers view them as too general to the point that they are not useful. As P6 described,

We need to create more specific rubrics. We find the district rubrics are not student-friendly and not specific enough. We need to break them apart, to slim down the verbiage and make them parent-friendly too. Do you know how much time that takes?

Part of rubric development involves breaking down the standards, which requires collaborative work time. As P10 noted, the state standards need to be made more specific for her class, and so the teams need time to discuss the levels of proficiency. P6 concurred with the time it takes to break down the standards into proficiency levels. “What exactly is proficient for this standard?” P6 asked. “I have to meet with others in my content area before or after school to have these kinds of discussions.”

A commonality among a majority of the teachers who were interviewed is that the time crunch has gotten better each year, and this year is much improved now that there are no letter grades. At the time of the interviews, the participants had two years of experience in proficiency grading under their belts. “There are a lot of little pieces that get more solid each year,” P5 explained. “I am finally starting to re-use what I have created.” Also, since now there are no letter grades under the pilot program, the stress is easing up a bit. P7 reflected,

Now I am not as overwhelmed. The first year is always the hardest. You are trying to think in totally different ways while doing a demanding job every year.

The second year was better, and now the third year is much better since we aren't doing letter grades.

P13 reported that the hardest time he had in the transition was taking the time to look at all his proficiency scores and convert them to a letter grade. It took so much time to report two grades and was very frustrating at times. "This year we don't have to put a grade on the trimester report, and it makes the system that much more worth it."

One finding from the interviews was that teachers with multiple preps continue to feel a shortage of time long after their other colleagues have adjusted. P3, who teaches three different subjects, feels like she is constantly creating new curriculum, examples, and assessments, even three years later. Some teachers at this school, like P11, teach a rotating, three-year curriculum to talented and gifted students, so her team still feels like they are re-inventing themselves three years after initial implementation. "I teach a three-year curriculum, and every year and I am having to re-write it to match proficiency-based teaching and assessment. So, it's not like it got easier after the first year."

District and school leaders recognize that adequate planning and collaboration time is an issue in continuing the transition over to proficiency grading. P1, a district administrator, explained that the adoption of the Proficiency Learning System was done without commitment to build common planning time into the schedule at every middle school. If teachers do not have collaborative time to work together to make these significant changes, it has to be done before or after school, when time is short anyway. According to P1, since district leaders initially lacked the political will to push for a late start or early release day, now school principals are still trying to initiate this change two years after implementation of the new grading system. P14, the school principal, has heard numerous pleas from his staff for common planning time for teams. For

example, P6 shared that “We are all telling (the principal) that we need more time with our teams, time to collaborate and share ideas with our peers, to share the load of all these changes....” The principal believes that a common planning time built into the school day, either through a late start or early release, would allow the teams the time they need for proficiency work. However, at this point the school board has not supported a change in the school schedule. A person in the district curriculum department, P2, is concerned that the push for reform might wane if adequate time is not set aside for common planning and curriculum design:

Teachers are thinking, I am not sure this is worth it if I am not given the things I need, the support I need, because I can see that the schedule is not set up for time for professional development and collaboration....What still drives [this reform] is the passionate belief that it is the right thing to do. But that will only go so far, especially when you look at how far you can stretch the rubber band before it breaks. It’s the worst feeling in the world as a teacher to want to do the right thing and to not have the time to do it.

P9, the vice principal, believes that at this point, without a change in schedule, the administration just has to do the best they can with what has been given to them. “We have to keep momentum going by supporting the teachers, so they can do the work.”

Inadequate technology.

On the list of challenges to change presented to those interviewed, technology was not on the list of possible barriers to change. However, it was mentioned repeatedly as a significant hurdle to implementation, so it is on Figure 1 under “other challenges.” Over and over, both administrators and teachers brought up concerns about outdated or limited technology. One of the first concerns of the district curriculum department was that the direction teachers and

principals were moving in did not match what the IT (Instructional Technology) department could offer. P1 remembers early frustrations in this area:

We were trying to set up meetings and explain to IT what is needed to move to proficiency grading, and they didn't even know what we were talking about. The language was so different, so IT had to be educated about proficiency along with everyone else.

The curriculum department had to work closely with the IT department to try and get them on board as quick as possible, but creating new code for the reporting system required both money and time. P2 remembers teachers who were engaged in the work early on pleading for a gradebook that would support the work they were trying to do. They were ahead in the change process but were not provided the needed technology to move forward.

The new code for entering grades was written and in place for the 2009 school year, the first year of implementation of the new model. Yet the reporting process was still frustrating for many teachers. Nine out of ten teachers interviewed brought up technology as an initial barrier to reform. In fact, reporting grades at the end of trimester was often described in quite negative terms. P8 identified the issues with technology as her biggest barrier that first year: "The technology was horrible! I keep thinking that if there was one thing that was going to kill proficiency it's going to be the way we are using technology to report proficiency." P12 said her biggest challenge was "waiting for IT to work out the bugs." For P7, reporting grades was one big headache that first year, but the frustrations finally eased when the principal was able to procure new computers for the teachers.

Common memories of that first year of transition involved freezing computer screens. P11 explained that the district computers were "slow and cumbersome." The computers at the

school were so outdated that teachers watched the computers freeze from overload. As P6 remembered, “[Grading] was taking forever, and we’d get this spinning ring, and your finger just hits the button over and over out of frustration. If you don’t have the right equipment, you’re up a creek.” P11 remembers thinking how terrible the software was and feeling incredibly stressed over inputting grades. P10 described her frustration as “between a rock and a hard place.”

When asked what advice she would offer to districts moving in this direction, P10 said adamantly, “Make sure you have a strong technology and reporting system to support the work of teachers. We struggled with an obsolete computer that wouldn’t let us input scores, but we weren’t allowed to use another system.”

Once the implementation of proficiency grading was announced in 2009, the principal had to immediately set to work on advocating for new computers for the building in order to make the process work. The current principal said that during the transition year, the problems expected were different than the problems reported. The principals were so worried about parent and community concerns, but they spent a lot of their time dealing with technology issues. P14 remembers that the barriers the principals had to focus on were “logistical elements, the reporting systems, the time and energy and frustration from IT” in trying to provide what the schools were asking for. The tools needed for proficiency reporting were completely different from the software used in traditional grading. To make matters worse, he said, the machines would “sit and spin” when large amounts of data were entered. The biggest complaint from teachers about proficiency grading was not about how to teach or assess, but how to report using the current grading system. This challenge eased up after the first year, when IT created more code for reporting and new computers were installed at the school.

Increase in job requirements.

The increase in job requirements was a moderate concern, identified in seven out of fourteen interviews. A district administrator, P1, knew that there would be some backlash from teachers being asked to do yet another reform initiative.

Our teachers complain about initiative fatigue. It was spot on. We had so much going on and initiatives from the district office... We were throwing Frisbees right and left and expecting teachers to catch them all. It was nuts. The dog is exhausted.

The district office decided to weave all the district initiatives together into one vision. By bringing together standards, accountability and proficiency together into one learning system, the district hoped that teachers would not view the change negatively. "It's about real change in education," he noted, not just another tweaking of the status quo. He said that one of the challenges at the district level was to motivate teachers to take on an increase in job requirements because they can see the positive change in teaching and grading that comes from it.

Concerns about an increase in job requirements was often mentioned in conjunction with discussions about shortage of time and grading issues. At the building level, five out of ten teachers interviewed believe they experienced increased job requirements by moving to a proficiency-based system. As P3 described, creating rubrics, creating examples of good and poor work, and grading on proficiency in every subject is overwhelming for someone who has three preps. She is unable to do all of this within the school day and has to do extra work at home. Multiple opportunities for proficiency means creating multiple assessments and extra opportunities, something four teachers specifically noted as extra work for teachers. P4 saw an increase in job requirements almost immediately, as she started re-evaluating everything she did,

every day, and went through the tedious process of re-planning all her units. The vice principal said that he has seen a big jump in creating formative assessments for units, and although it is valuable, teachers view it as one more thing in the long list of things they have to do. The challenge now, he feels, is to let go of things that are not working and use energy toward what really makes a difference in learning.

Different aspects of proficiency-based instruction and assessment are perceived by teachers as adding extra work. With a teaching and grading system that is enmeshed in standards, it becomes laborious when new standards are adopted at the state and national level. P5 noted that in her content area, “The standards have changed three times. I keep changing and adapting to the targets. I have stopped laminating my targets.....” In addition, assessments are viewed as more labor-intensive because they involve more holistic grading and not just calculating a percentage. In addition, reflection on where a student is at in their learning and writing descriptive feedback on assignments requires more from a teacher than just writing a numerical score. Two teachers stated that they are frustrated with how much grading they do at home now. However, the vice principal noted, “Our teachers are willing to take on this extra work because they believe in what we are doing here.”

Issues with reporting double grades repeatedly came up in the interviews in connection with concerns about increased job requirements. When the district implemented the proficiency learning system district-wide in 2009, teachers were required to convert proficiency scores to a letter grade at the end of the grading period. Numerous teachers brought up the frustration with reporting both proficiency grades and letter grades at the end of the trimester, which added so much time at the end of the grading period. In P6’s mind, doing two grades was “like a big anchor. It was like you were trying to swim and you had this anchor, because you were being

drawn back to the traditional system every time you had to convert to a grade.” P8 had similar feelings, conveying that it felt like double the work. She would grade and then have to do another grade: “You’d be looking at all these summary judgments and then have to think about how it would transfer to a letter grade. It didn’t transfer well. Now it’s so much easier to do grades.” P14, the principal, agreed with teachers: “After I have done all this work, now I have to do more work and transform all this data into one, mandated letter grade? It doesn’t mean what it should mean, and it takes the emphasis off student learning.” The school successfully applied for a pilot program to experiment with ending letter grades entirely, something that will continue next year as well. The interviews revealed a clear consensus that doing away with letter grades this year eased frustrations among staff. There was only one teacher of those interviewed who would prefer to keep doing two grades, mainly to keep consistency with high school grade reporting.

Challenges by external stakeholders.

Both district leaders interviewed recalled the initial backlash from the community, who were not prepared to cope with such transformational reform at their children’s middle schools. What P2 found interesting is that the move away from percentage grading at the middle schools sparked fear about getting rid of grades at the high school. Parents transferred their anxiety to the high school level, assuming that those schools were next. However, the district told parents that “we can’t change the external world. There is no plan to get rid of grades at the high school. Still, there was a lot of turbulence about what it means to bring those two systems together.” Parental concerns in that first year stemmed from a fear about transitioning to high school and college. P1 explained that challenges came mostly from people who are educated in the *game* of succeeding in school. “They are saying, I know how the game works, and I am teaching my kid

how to succeed in the game, and now you change the game?” When grading became different, even if it was better, it created noise by parents who wanted to keep things as they were. After the initial backlash, the district formed parent committees to increase parent knowledge about the theory behind proficiency and the research behind moving to this new system. As P1 explained, “All the parents know is what they themselves experienced in school... We had to work through foundational thinking and learning.” Some of the most vocal opponents against proficiency grading eventually developed consensus, and most parents offered their support for the new system once they came to understand the reasons for the new model.

For parents, proficiency-based grading was foreign to them. P6 recalled having fears about how parents were going to perceive all these changes. P4 remembers some loud parents at first: “They got very loud and almost yelling, how is he going to succeed in high school?” The concern was mostly from the eighth grade parents and students; the sixth graders had not yet experienced letter grades so it just seemed more like the elementary report card. P13 remembers getting questions from parents initially, but then many parents liked how much more information they were getting in the new report card. For the most part, concerns from parents have been minimal, especially after that first year. P5 has found that “if the kids are ok, then the parents will come along. I want my kids to feel confident talking about it, and then the parents will be ok too.” A small group of parents still voice concerns, but teachers reported that parent backlash is minimal now that parents know the new system. Three teachers also gave credit to the principal for keeping community backlash at a minimum through on-going communication.

One of the teachers interviewed, P9, recently transferred from another school in the district where the administration took a less active role in communication to parents about the new system. When parents received the report cards with the new scoring system, this teacher

received a barrage of emails from parents saying they had no idea what the new report card meant. She spent a day sending 30-40 emails to parents explaining the new grading system. Once she transferred to this school, she noticed less questions from parents because communication to parents was more pro-active.

Comfort with tradition.

Another moderate challenge to change was comfort with long-held traditions, identified by five of those interviewed. From the view of P13, it took time to get people on board to the ideas of abandoning traditional grading:

When this was first rolled out, I remember that a lot of people were just curious as to what was wrong with the old grading system. A lot of that was because some teachers had spent most of their careers doing traditional grading, and in their mind, they had a way of grading that worked.

P7 recounted how some teachers were dragging their feet in the process. According to her experience, a minority of staff were set in their ways, even with the training. They did not want to change and do something different, “even though they knew it was best for kids.” The vice principal added that the change has been hard for those who came here from other schools recently because they were not here from the beginning. He offered an example of a new teacher who “doesn’t buy in to what we are doing...it’s something totally new.”

Both district leaders felt that long-standing traditions in grading were a stumbling block to reform. P1 called the move to proficiency “very deep change” that required a new way of thinking about assessment at all levels, from the school board down to the individual student. The curriculum department tried to get in front and “plow the ground,” by training teachers in theory and creating a moral imperative to change. While some teachers experienced a paradigm

shift in thinking right away, others were stuck on old assumptions for quite a while. P2 felt that “unlearning” the old ways had to be deliberate:

What if we were starting from a blank slate? It would be so different. We would get a chance to design our grading system, design it from the ground up, that’s a whole different conversation. We are moving from a current structure and system that has existed for 100 plus years, and we are trying to unlearn some things, and unlearning is extremely difficult. People will hold fast to structures and systems that are currently in place because it is just so scary to imagine those things not being there.

Minor challenges.

There were only four people, all teachers, who believed they needed more professional development prior to moving over to the new system. P3 had concerns that there were hardly any discussions about how Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with special education students fit into the new model. P8 believed that much of the initial training was in theory and needed more “nuts and bolts” of the day-to-day changes in curriculum and assessment. P4 agreed, stating that although teacher leaders received a lot of training the two previous years, the rest of the staff “was blindsided...the ball was rolling without the immediate support on the day-to-day changes” required for implementation. One area where teachers felt they needed more support was in transferring proficiency grades to letter grades. Since initially teachers were required to post both forms of grades, it felt arbitrary and after the fact. As P10 explained, “District policy was quite wishy-washy. Mostly (Highly Proficient) PHPs for an A. What does mostly mean?” Even though district offered a general policy, it was basically up to the teacher to decide how to transfer proficiency scores to a letter grade.

In addition, fear of the unknown was a challenge identified by only three participants, two of district leaders and one teacher. P1 saw fears increase initially, but he believed that fears diminished as teachers saw positive results in the classroom. He reflected, “Meaningful change in practice always involves the unknown. Any real change involves the practice of working harder without seeing immediate results. Some teachers tried to go too fast and struggled. A big shift requires that you turn slowly.” P2 stated that at district trainings, she saw fear from teachers who wanted a clear, defined system when the district was charting new ground and all the answers were not clear. She saw a reluctance to “embrace the chaos” because we are in the middle of change. It requires trust, and not every teacher had it. For example, P4 had some fears moving to the new system, wondering what it meant for her as a professional, as a teacher, and what new job requirements were going to be involved. With such a big change, it was hard for her to envision all the pieces that would have to go into it. These feelings did not keep her from wanting to move forward, however, and now she is glad that she did not let her fears inhibit the transition process.

No teachers identified a lack of leadership as a challenge in the initial transition year, but two district administrators said it was a concern at the district level. While the principals were demonstrating transformative leadership within their own buildings, the change was not school board driven. The school board came on board after the movement had already gained momentum, which was a challenge. Once the change process became more visible and more public in 2009, the school board received backlash from parents and was not prepared to handle the controversy and noise. P1 believes that the new superintendent is on board and is really positive about the proficiency learning system, which created support for the pilot program at the school used in the case study. Without the current support of the school board and

superintendent, the pilot to eliminate letter grades from reporting this year would not have been approved or continued.

Factors that Fostered Implementation

The school chosen for the case study is the only school in the district which is doing a pilot program of removing letter grades from the report card. The district views this particular middle school as being *ahead of the curve* in implementing a proficiency-based grading model (P2). The next part of the interviews examined factors which encouraged this type of transformative change within the building. Research question number two was worded as follows:

Research question #2: What factors were cited by teachers and leaders as fostering the implementation of proficiency-based instructional and grading practices in a suburban school district?

Coding of the responses revealed three factors which enabled reform to move forward: a paradigm shift in thinking about grading, visionary leadership, and a collaborative culture.

Paradigm shift in views about assessment and grading.

When asked about professional development and views surrounding the new grading system, it became quickly evident that a majority of teachers have embraced a new way of thinking about assessment and grading. Evidence indicates that the change of thinking occurred slowly and expanded to more teachers over time. Middle school principals embraced new ideas from the research, and the district supplemented the movement with trainings by nationally-known researchers in the field. Over time, the ideas surrounding proficiency-based instruction and grading became endemic, followed by a push for district-level reform. Findings indicate

that teachers who received in-depth training and who were an integral part of the reform process embrace a moral imperative for changes in grading practices.

According to district leaders in the teaching and learning department (P1 and P2), the movement toward proficiency grading started many years ago, with teacher involvement in the state Certificates of Initial Mastery (CIM) and Certificates of Advanced Mastery (CAM). The state requirements of CIM and CAM involved rubrics and mastery learning concepts that followed students through the grade levels, beginning in 1991. While the state program was eventually ended, teachers in the district were exposed to concepts of mastery learning and common rubric grading. In fact, some teachers continued to use the rubrics from CIM and CAM after the program was no longer mandated by the state. This planted seeds for discussion about what current research asserted regarding the weaknesses in traditional grading methods. In teacher trainings, discussions started centering on “Why do we assess, what do we do now, and how is that working for us?” (P1). In training, P1 explained that people began to see that the current system is not telling them anything. According to P1, teachers began to see that the current system is actually harmful to the lower-achieving kids, in that they are told they are a failure even if they achieve 50% of the work.

Next, the middle school principals started examining current research in the area of assessment. P2 explained that these efforts sprung from community pressure to make middle schools more rigorous:

Many years ago the middle school principals started doing the work of looking at best practices in middle schools, and it was really because the community was saying to us, we don't see middle schools as rigorous, we don't see middle schools as value-added.

The principals came together to review research, and the principals came to believe that quality assessment practices should be the focus if the middle schools were looking for transformational change. P14 believes that the principals developed a shift in thinking that was concurrent to shifting teacher views about grading.

The principals decided to partner with teachers to make this kind of transformative change happen at the building level. While they themselves were learning new knowledge about assessment from prominent educational researchers, such as Rick Stiggins and Dylan Wiliam, they chose teacher leaders from their building (30 total) to get the same knowledge base. From P2's perspective, these were leaders in their own building who had tried some things on their own, had been to summer assessment workshops, but needed to dialogue with like-minded colleagues. This initial group of 30 attended a workshop that gave them an overview of what a proficiency-based model would look like, not just in the classroom but as a school-wide model. P5, who was one of the original 30, felt like district leaders wanted teacher input from the beginning, which was one of the keys to success.

“Teacher leaders were the virus; it grew from there,” P2 believes. Training slowly expanded to include more and more teachers, as interest in proficiency started to take off. P10 remembers that after the first group of 30, there were the Nike scholars, three or four people from each building, who received release time for professional development in proficiency-based practices. (They were called Nike scholars because of the grant from the Nike School Innovation Fund which funded the training). When asked if this reform was “teacher led or district led, or both,” not one person felt it was only district led. In fact, not a single person cited top-down mandates as a challenge to change. Seven interviews brought forth the idea of partnership, with comments around teachers and principals working together with a common purpose. P2 said that

it truly was a partnership, that was principal-led, and teacher-driven. P5 saw the change as “a group of people who started experimenting, and then they were given district support.” P7 saw the change as a circle of people who embraced change in grading practices, and the circle grew larger and larger each year. P5 saw the movement as mostly grass roots: “teachers teaching other teachers.”

P2, a district leader in the curriculum department, cited one factor of success as when the middle schools all chose the same vision for their schools moving forward, so the district was able to pool resources and have a summer conference facilitated by Rick Stiggins:

It was a really big deal, that all eight principals said we are going to devote all our professional development time to this, and we’re all going to do the same thing.

We are going to communicate that this is our mission and vision. So that’s a big deal, when you are in a district that is mainly site-based, in decision-making,that they are driving this work collectively.

Funding could have been a hurdle, but the district received a Nike grant that supported the need for professional development. In the summer of 2008, the conference focused on theory and a moral imperative for change in grading practices. P1 says that this type of grading reform “takes a change of heart.” A teacher can change the way they teach, but if they do not see a moral imperative for change, it will not last. The three teachers who attended this conference remembered it vividly. Each of these teachers made a positive comment about how it changed their thinking, like P6, who felt it “completely changed his views about grading.” To P1, it was the springboard that moved the district in a whole new direction.

The 2008-09 school year saw changes in instructional and assessment practices, but final grade reporting stayed the same. P6 compared the two transition years, from 2007-09, as “proficiency teaching with training wheels.” Teachers were trained in the philosophy first, then PLCs were formed, where there was, according to P6, “a lot of discussion, a lot of collaboration across grade levels and schools. Now the training wheels are off, all the grades are gone, and we are in full-blown proficiency and what all that means for kids.”

District leaders indicated that the Proficiency Learning System took shape over time, as efforts were made take theory and turn it into practice, and the district had to feel their way into the future, often learning as they went along. The hard thing about outside consultants, according to P2, is that

They don’t live in the real world, they don’t live in the district; my struggle with many of the great minds in assessment world is, how do you operationalize it, how do you make it live in the classroom? That is the hard work we are trying to do here.

While some people try to package proficiency work and put it in a box, P2 explained that the process is so complicated it is not something that can be explained simply to another district. She views her district as plowing new ground, in that they are creating this new, comprehensive teaching and grading system as they go along, with additional refining each year.

Coding of the data showed that teachers who were part of the initial 30, or who were in the Nike Scholar group, or who attended the Rick Stiggins conference in 2008, revealed a paradigm shift in thinking about assessment. During the interview, these teachers discussed proficiency as if it was absolutely the right thing to do. P4 called the change “good, meaningful

work that is the right thing. I can't imagine going back to what I used to do, using points, and offering extra credit for a tissue box." P5 added, "Once you let go of points, it feels so good...I think globally now, does this student get the concept? Other teachers don't trust their own judgment. They think they need points." The teachers in this group, who the principal calls the "forward thinkers" in their building, embraced the change with open minds. "I have hated grades from the beginning. What does an A mean anyway?" P6 noted. "I was on board from the beginning." P7 had similar comments. "For me, I knew it was the way I wanted to move my teaching and it was the way I wanted to assess. From the beginning, I didn't have any reservations." P13 feels that teachers and leaders really wanted a change because they really wanted parents and students to know exactly where the students are at in their learning. To him, a grade of a B doesn't really tell you how the child is doing on all the different areas of the subject. In interviews with these teachers, it was evident that they were thinking about assessment in a whole new way; traditional grading just did not make sense to them any longer.

Teachers who were not at the initial trainings or the summer conference exhibited less of a moral imperative for change. While this group still embraced many of the ideas of proficiency instruction, the language used to describe the switch was less passionate. Also, their focus was on more on the nuts and bolts of changing instruction and less on the big picture of viewing assessment in a whole new way. This could be because those in this group did not feel their training was adequate to move forward. P11, who did not receive any extra training, was more shocked than excited in the fall of 2009. "We showed up to school and were told that grades were a thing of the past. We focused so much on reporting that first year, but then the second year was better because we focused on how to teach for proficiency." P10 also was not sure the school was ready to move forward. She had various concerns and felt she was not ready to

make the switch, for specific learning targets and rubrics were not in place. P3 said that new teachers were not provided an in-service to teach them everything they needed to know. She came to the school and felt she could not fully grasp the new system. She still sees value to letter grades and likes some of the changes but not others. “It could be a mix. We could do numbers and percentages but combine new ways of teaching.” P12, who said she was one of the “regular teachers,” felt the transition was very tough. She is not a big fan of rubrics and thought that the emphasis was on the grading tool and not on teaching differently. P9, the assistant principal, gave the example of a new teacher who “doesn’t buy in to what we are doing. It’s not that easy for her.” According to both P2 and P9, there are no workshops for new teachers on proficiency grading, so it has created a gap between those who were here from the beginning and those who were not. All of the teachers mentioned above conveyed value in proficiency scoring, but the language they used in describing the new system was less passionate and showed more concerns about the process.

Visionary leadership.

During the interviews, some of the questions focused on building leadership during the transition years. Questions pertained to the principal’s leadership style and actions taken during the change process. The person who was principal at the school used in the case study was on leave for the 2011-12 school year, so there was new leadership in the building during the year of the study. Although the principal from the 2009-11 school years could not be interviewed for the study, everyone interviewed was asked about their perceptions about his leadership. Findings indicate that the principal’s visionary and participative leadership styles, as well as trust, were positive factors that enabled transformational change to occur in this building.

In the list of challenges to change, not a single teacher mentioned building leadership as a challenge to change. In fact, teachers went out of their way to say that this type of reform was only possible because of the visionary leadership within the building. According to P5, the principal's ability to articulate the goal helped him convey the vision to the rest of the staff. P11 concurred, saying,

There was a lot of cynicism, having seen many school concepts come and go, but [the principal] kept coming back to the philosophy behind it. Because we had such strong leadership, he clearly got people on board and gained the full cooperation of the staff.

P6 agreed that the principal had a vision for the school; he believed that backing up the changes with research helped move the staff in a new direction.

One of the district leaders, P1, believes that the principal was instrumental in the change process, because he was able to balance strong leadership with gentle persuasion:

You need one good visionary leader, but it's a tight/loose thing. The leader has to know when to lead and when to support. When a leader says they are going to be accountable for kid's learning, they have to be ready to say to the community that the old system isn't working. [The principal] would get in front of groups of people and tell them that we have been lying to you about your kid's learning. Wouldn't you like to know the truth? The sad part about that is, some parents think, no, keep lying to me. The system works for me at home.

In P2's mind, this principal was constantly communicating the vision to district leaders, parents, and the larger community. P6 felt like the principal was passionate about the concept, and he got

other teachers on board by enabling them to clearly see the vision of what assessment and grading could be.

In the interviews, it was evident that the principal transferred this passion to the teachers.

P7 mirrored the passion she saw in her principal:

This is what he believes in. He believes this is the way kids should be assessed.

This is the way kids should be taught. [The principal] is one of those people who you follow because you respect him so much,...and I think especially that first year, if it hadn't been him driving it, it wouldn't have worked. It was his passion that made people willing to try.

When asked about leadership in the building, P8 spoke with emotion in describing her former principal: "The thing that amazed me about this staff is that everyone loved [the principal]. And we still do. There's something about his leadership that made this stuff work. Not harsh, not micromanaging. It felt like he wanted to all struggle through it together." To her, he wanted to figure out all the little pieces as a team, and that made her feel valued. P2 also felt that visionary leadership combined with collaboration with teachers, really made the difference. She described the principal who led the change as "an agitator, very focused leader, very no nonsense, top-down leader, but he trusts teachers as well. He is a collaborative leader but not soft; he directs, but implicitly listens to teachers, and they feel heard."

One theme that emerged from the interviews is that teachers trusted their former principal and he trusted them. P4 explained how the staff trusted him tremendously; he had an open-door policy and welcomed new ideas from teachers. She spoke with passion about how he was on the front lines, and that he took criticism from the community. "He gave us back up, shielding the doubts." P9 used the word "phenomenal" to describe the support she received from her principal.

P6 saw him as a really good sales person, but it only worked because the staff trusted him. “He had the respect of everyone in the building. He could have been passionate about another concept and been able to sell that to us.” P4 witnessed the principal working with other teachers who were not fully on board to switch to the new grading system. He spent a lot of time with them, and in her perspective, “brought them on board” with the rest of the group.

Teachers were also asked about the new principal and his leadership style. Interviews revealed that the new principal’s support and collaborative leadership style have allowed reform to continue to move forward. In P5’s view, it was a seamless transition. “He is always asking us, what do you need? And comes through with it....Without all this support, it wouldn’t be happening.” P8 said that it made all the difference to her that the new principal supported the science department’s efforts to change the reporting categories so they made more sense and matched national core standards; he pushed for that change and got it approved. P9 gave an example of how the new principal has weekly meetings with teacher leaders and always asks how he can support the work. This year he has also pushed the school board to get collaborative work time built into the school day so the teachers can fine-tune the new system. Still, the change to a new principal was difficult for some teachers, who worried about the future. Yet as P4 said, “We have our feet so into the process, if anything were to falter, the teachers would keep moving forward. Some teachers have been worried about whether we will continue to get support for this change. Time will tell.” The new principal knew what he was getting into by applying for this position and welcomed the challenge. He said there was a “sense of urgency, sense of excitement that comes with this type of transformational work.” There are a few concerns that the focus is so much on the positives about the new system that people are pushing aside what still needs work. P3 would like to see more of a feedback loop to offer concerns that

have come up in the process. According to her, the school needs to know not just what is going well, but what they can improve on to serve all the students at the school.

School culture.

As part of the interview process, teachers and school administrators were asked to describe the atmosphere of the school during this transition process. Teachers were also asked in what ways they worked with their colleagues to facilitate the change over to proficiency grading. Two themes emerged from these questions. First, the policy of consistency within the building has reduced tension between students, parents and teachers and allowed reform to move forward. Second, the school exudes a positive, collaborative vibe in which teachers feel supported by their colleagues.

P7 described how the principal first took a vote within the core committee to make a decision to move forward, and every teacher on the committee wanted to go for it. The new grading system was then presented to staff as an all-or-nothing switch:

In the building, we came back from summer break, and I knew we were moving to this because I was on the committee for the school. (The principal) sat down with the group, and said we have been working toward this for two years, now it is either sink or swim....The expectation was that everyone was going to move forward together.

P12 affirmed that moving forward as a whole staff was the right thing to do. She commented, “I hear about other schools, doing it piece-meal, but we all did it together. Consistency has been crucial. I just don’t hear complaints, either from teachers or parents.”

The current principal of this school, P14, offered a contrast example of why other middle schools in the district are not at the same level of reform as this school. At another school in the

district, it is less unified, and some teachers are still using old systems of grading that they feel comfortable with. At other schools, the administration has required that the staff use elements of proficiency but has not mandated a complete switch over to the new system. He explained that the combination of two systems has led to confusion with parents and students: “If there is confusion, inconsistencies, then the parents and students fall back on the old system.” As he explained, if teachers are using multiple models of grading, students and parents will not know what the ultimate goal is. Is it to get an A, or is it to get essential skills? In contrast, the principal believes that the main difference here is consistency: “100% consistency is one of our main differences here.” He looked through the report cards to see any inconsistencies, anything that was different. He and the facilitators met with those teachers, and worked out the bugs so everything was the same. P13 was glad that the principal expected 100% support. “I can say that I am glad that our principal didn’t really give us a choice. I think it made people work harder to switch to the new system.”

When asked to describe the culture of his school, the current principal perceived there to be a strong culture of collaboration among staff. He says his staff “supports each other more than any school I have seen” through PLC time, content meetings, and just every-day positive interactions. Even though the master schedule does not have specific curriculum time to collaborate, he sees teachers meeting before and after school to do what is best for kids and their learning. At PLCs, the teachers have been able to share formative practices and implement new ideas in the proficiency learning system. P4 believes that her school has a *culture of sharing* so that no one feels isolated in the classroom. P12 said that the district has given her release time to meet with other colleagues, since she is the only person in the building who teaches her subject, which has helped share the work load.

Teachers at this school believe that their school culture sets them apart from other schools in the district. “We have that unity piece other buildings don’t have,” P5 commented. P6, who transferred to another building and then returned to this school, said he wanted to come back to the culture here:

We are open and willing to try new things...there are people [elsewhere] who think it is a fad and that it will go away. We are not letting it. Every year we are doing it, we get a little stronger. Honestly, if teachers just sat down and looked at it they would see that it makes perfect sense. We all see that here.

When the assistant principal arrived at this school, the staff was well into the change process. “I was like wow, everyone is focused on solutions, doing what’s right. Someone walks into my office and says ‘I’ve got this idea’ and we come up with the best way to solve the problem.” In his perception, every person feels valued and knows that their voice will be heard. P11 acknowledged that it is harder for those coming in to the culture; they transfer in and try to catch up with the new system. Yet in her perception, the facilitators and staff do everything possible to bring those people into the culture. P8, who has worked with the union, said that the staff has such a positive, open-minded culture that no one has filed a grievance regarding the extra time and work associated with this transition to the new grading system. “At other schools,” she said, “staff would probably file a grievance, but not here.”

Changes in the Learning Environment

While the main focus of the research was on the transition process from one grading system to another, it is also valuable to examine changes in the learning environment resulting from this change. Transitioning from one system to another should only be considered if it

produces positive results for teachers and students. One district leader (P2) summarized this point perfectly:

This is about teaching and learning, not grading. Other districts focus on grading and reporting. You haven't changed anything if you just change the marks.

Student learning hasn't been impacted. Schools have to look at [this reform] in the context of what is happening differently with the classroom and the teachers.

The classroom has to look different, to feel different.

Consequently, the third research question rounded-out the research by gathering evidence regarding changes in teaching and learning:

Research Question #3: What changes in the learning environment have teachers experienced in adopting proficiency-based instructional practices within their classrooms?

Three key changes in teaching and learning were evident from the case-study interviews: 1) a new, clearer language of learning, 2) focused teaching of learning targets, and 3) positive changes in assessment practices. Taken together, these three changes have resulted in improved communication regarding student achievement.

A new language of learning.

There has been a significant shift at this school in regards to how teachers and students discuss the learning process in the classroom setting. Analysis of the interviews clearly revealed a new language of learning emerged as part of the proficiency-based learning model.

Conversations around achievement, gaps in learning, and where improvement is needed now involve a new language around skills rather than points and letter grades. P5 reflected, "My conversations with students are so different now. I say something like, you mostly got this unit, but this is one area you still need to work on." P7 has noticed an increase in conversations she

has with students about their work, and the discussions are more in-depth than under the old system. Students now focus on the skills they need rather than how many points they have accumulated. She commented,

Before, it was all about the grades, it wasn't about the learning. I have seen how it has transitioned. The question I get now is, how can I improve my writing?
Instead of what do I need to do to get the A?

P12 has also noticed that she has so many more conversations about learning with her students. She can sit down and talk about skills in a way that students understand what they did well and where they can improve, rather than just looking at a point total.

Not only has the dialogue itself changed, but the words have more positive connotations. Using words such as *growth* rather than *failure* and encouraging students to improve by re-doing assessments has made discussions around grades less critical of the student. P6 believes the language surrounding grading has become much more positive since implementing the new system:

Now, I don't see a lack of motivation in students. Instead, I see hope to improve. Back in the traditional system, if you didn't perform well, and got 45%, and that's an F. Now, [I say] you are working toward this skill, and what can we do to move you over to the right? And that's another opportunity waiting for them to score higher. What happened to the first score? It didn't matter. The student did what he needed to learn the skill. We're all novices. It's not an F now; a student is not a failure if he is just learning something. If I am learning to bowl, and I am a beginner, I am not a failure. That's the type of analogies I use with students to

help them get it. That old system is so negative, and the negativity isn't really here now.

As part of the new language, students are more involved in reflecting on their own learning and discussing their learning with the teacher. "Students are asking, how can I improve, rather than how many points do I need?" said P7. According to P4, students are taking more ownership of where they are at, and they actually look at the feedback because there is so much more than when they just got a point total. "Students think, I got the concept here but not here. What can I do to be proficient?" When asked if she felt this was making a difference in the learning environment, P8 said, "Absolutely.....Students come up to me and don't ask for extra credit. They ask, why am I not proficient? And we look at ways to get there. Extra work is now geared toward meeting the learning target." For P12, she observed that there are reduced student complaints because of proficiency. "In my conversations with students, I hear a lot less complaints. It used to be, why did you give me this? Now, they see exactly why they got what they got. We can sit down, look at the rubric, and talk about it."

District survey data from Pacific Research and Evaluation (2011) shows a similar shift in conversations surrounding learning that are district-wide. Qualitative staff survey data from the school year 2010-11 includes 178 responses from middle school teachers for the question, "What impact, if any, has this standards work had on students at your school? How do you know it had this impact?" The standards work referred to in the question is the change over to the proficiency learning model within the district. Open and axial coding concluded that a total of 44 out of 178 responses included ideas in line with new ways of communicating and discussing learning between teacher and student. For example, one teacher wrote that the new system "has changed the language students use to talk about their own learning....I hear students talk about

how a poor example of work could be revised to meet criteria.” Another teacher wrote, “I believe students feel less mystified about the process of teaching and learning and their place in it. They are confidently using the language of proficiency, and they know what they need to do to reach their goals.” One teacher believed that the students were thinking about learning at a whole new level:

I feel my students’ involvement at a metacognitive level has increased a great deal. I know this because they are able to discuss the concepts and their proficiency in an accurate manner. They are reflecting more on their progress in specific skills instead of letter grades, which to me means that they have a clearer understanding of what they are learning.

For another teacher, the new language of proficiency has led to “a different vision for what grades mean.” The students look at grades compared to a ladder of proficiency, something that is fluid and changeable.

The district-wide survey data included many comments about how conversations between teachers and students centered on skills rather than points. One teacher is impressed with how many students can approach her and state what their weak areas are and what they need to improve upon. In this teacher’s experience, these types of conversations did not happen before proficiency grading. Some conversations are internal within the student. One teacher reflected that many of the students “can discuss where they are on the rubric for monitoring inner conversation. The students have told me that they are aware of this inner conversation and it helps give them direction.” The district survey data also included comments about how the language used in proficiency grading is more positive. One teacher noted that her students talk of “trying again” when they do not meet a target rather than sulking over a failing grade. All in

all, the district-wide survey comments are similar to what was reported in the case study interviews regarding a whole new dialogue of learning between teacher and student.

Focused teaching of learning targets.

An impetus for a change in dialogue about learning is that proficiency-based practices measure achievement by examining the extent to which a student has achieved proficiency of learning targets. The case study interviews revealed that the classroom is more focused around specific learning targets based on the state standards, something that has had a positive impact on the learning environment for both teachers and students. When asked what was different about his classroom environment, P6 stated that is one key thing is “common learning targets. My students write them in a journal; I read them and introduce them....I have increased awareness of what I am doing because I put a learning target on everything I do.” P6 feels like he is a more consistent teacher because he has a goal to reach by the end of the unit. P4 concurred, saying that a big change in her classroom was making students aware of the learning target, but her awareness increased as well. For P4, her lessons have become very purposeful, for each lesson is focused on the goal of meeting a specific learning destination. She stated that both she and her students have a better understanding of what the lesson is about and the expectation of what knowledge should be gained because of the lesson. She also states at the beginning of major projects what is needed to reach a proficiency mark, so students have a clear direction of what they need to do. “It provides clarity and consistency in everything I do. I really do like it. I can’t imagine going back to what I used to do with points, like offering extra credit for a tissue box.”

For P5, the focus on learning targets made her more self-reflective. “How can I teach in multiple ways, and offer multiple opportunities to reach this learning project?” are some of the

questions she found herself asking about each unit. For her, proficiency offered a definite direction on grading and assessment, but it has also allowed her to be creative in how students reach the learning target. To move away from percentage grading in her math classroom, P5 developed a tracker to help students monitor their own progress on meeting the learning targets for the quarter. “They realize that their grades are still a work in progress, that they can get out their tracker and see what they still need to accomplish by the end of the grading period.” P8 believes that her assignments are more geared toward the learning target, and extra “fluff” has been taken out. Homework is all geared toward meeting the learning target and preparing for assessments. She said one positive change is that she shows strong and weak examples so students clearly know what is expected on assignments. Also, if a student is not yet proficient on a project, he or she can revise the work to bring up the grade. Overall, P8 feels that students are more engaged in their learning because they are active participants in meeting the learning targets. P11 had a similar answer, saying that a key difference with proficiency is that both teachers and students know “the underlying purpose for studying something” which improves the overall classroom environment.

Numerous responses in the interviews indicated that specific learning targets make it easier for students to engage in a self-reflection process which compares where they are at in their skills in relation to the learning goal. P10 has increased self-reflection assignments in her classroom because she has noticed the more students self-reflect, the better they become at making accurate judgments about their own learning. She commented, “They have become much more metacognitive in their abilities by doing the reflections, and they can see why their learning is working or what isn’t working.” P11 also made a comment about how students are getting better at assessing themselves relative to the learning targets. Criteria grading is

something students can understand, so they can judge their own work and the work of peers against the criteria. IEP students also benefit from specific learning targets, as long they are simple and easy to understand, reported P3. She has her students self-assess using modified rubrics.

In addition, the principal explained that the learning targets embedded in proficiency instruction allow for easier school-wide goal setting with students and communication between staff members. Home rooms have always done goal setting, but now students can look at the learning targets for different subjects and identify what they are doing well and where they may need extra help. From the perception of the principal, the learning targets are so specific that it allows for easier reporting of progress to parents, to IEP case managers, and to teachers of intervention programs. Instead of telling another teacher that a student “has a C,” it can be easily explained what skills need to be worked on. The focus on learning targets has led some students to come in to get extra help to meet the learning target. P10 noted that students come in for extra help before they do a re-take, and she sees a change in how students look at their learning. They want to know what they can do to meet the target, where before it was trying to make changes to get extra points.

District-wide survey data collected by Pacific Research (2011) shows that a high percentage of teachers throughout the district use the state standards to create learning targets that guide their instruction (Figure 2). A total of 256 middle school teachers from the district’s eight middle schools were surveyed and asked to state the extent to which they agreed with the statement listed. Thirty-six of the 256 surveys were completed by teachers at the school used for the case study. Figure 2 shows the percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements connected to teaching to learning targets. While about two thirds of all

middle school teachers are using the self-assessment process, over 90% of teachers are teaching to learning targets and using the targets to plan and guide instruction.

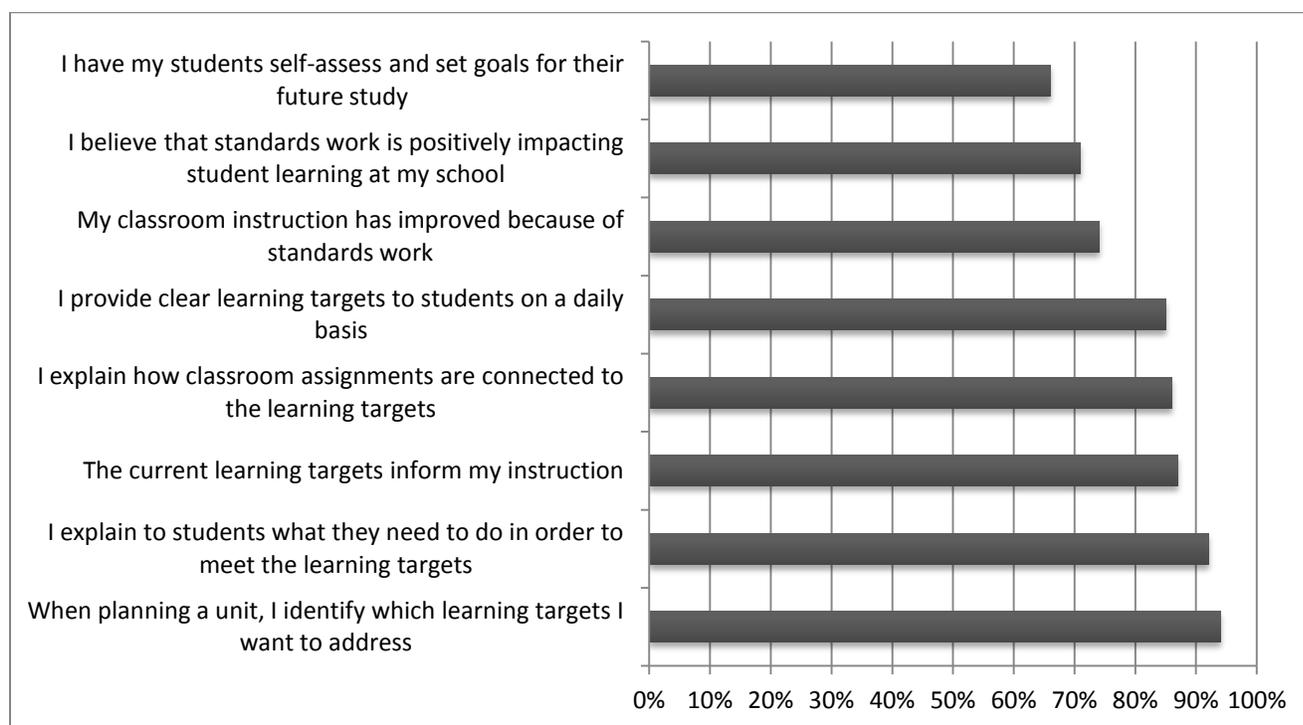


Figure 2. Percentage of middle school teachers who agree or strongly agree with the statement (n=256).

Student survey data from the same survey (Pacific Research and Evaluation, 2011) confirms that the majority of students in this district are more knowledgeable about the learning targets since moving to a proficiency-based learning model (Figure 3). Of the 6,882 student surveys completed from the eight middle schools, 651 were from students at the school used in the case study. Although the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements was slightly lower than that of the teacher responses, varying from 67% to 82%, there is still a clear indication that learning targets are being utilized for instruction in over two-thirds of the classrooms in this district.

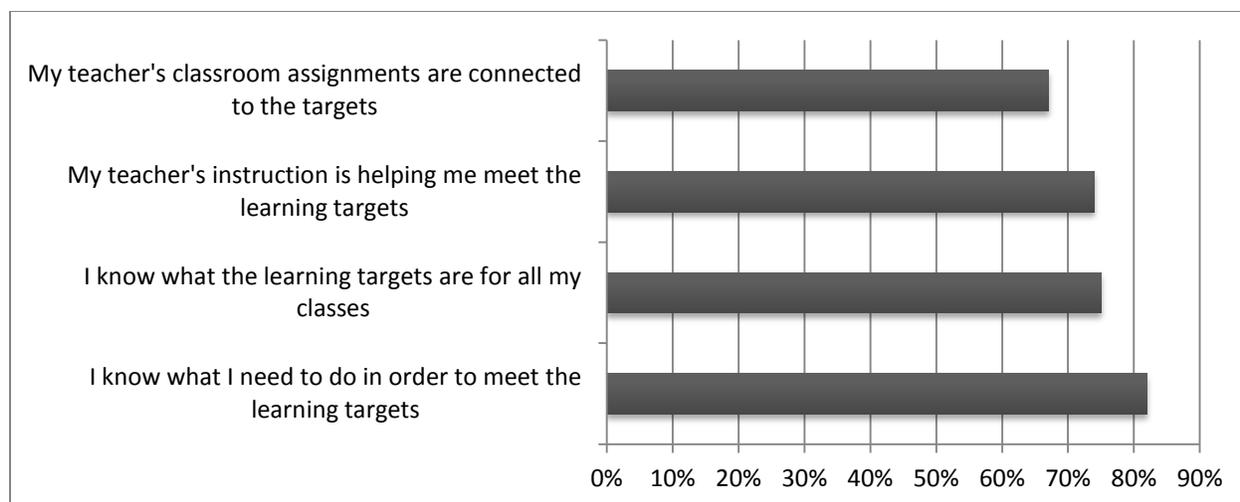


Figure 3. Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (n=6,882).

Qualitative survey data collected during the spring of 2011 also confirms that teachers throughout this district find more purpose and direction in their teaching by focusing on learning targets (Pacific Research and Evaluation, 2011). Teachers wrote 174 responses to the open-ended question, “What impact, if any, has the standards work had on your teaching?” A total of 101 out of the 174 responses included ideas connected to increased focus and purposeful teaching and also how targets provide a clear direction for student learning. “Making targets transparent to students has made them crystal clear to me,” wrote one teacher. Another teacher commented, “It has had a tremendous impact on focusing my instruction.” The word *focus* came up many times in the responses. For example, one teacher wrote, “I am more focused and intentional in my instruction. I am better able to connect the work in class to the objectives for their learning.” When the targets were referenced, it was almost always a positive response. For instance, one teacher reflected, “I can see so clearly how if a student knows the target, it is easier to reach it.” The use of goals was also intertwined in many responses. “It has given me a specific goal to reach,” wrote one teacher. “I have a purpose for my lessons and a target I am trying to reach.” The district-wide survey responses are similar to the case study interviews. In

both cases, teachers viewed learning targets as a valuable addition to their classroom environment.

Changes in assessment practices.

The case study interviews clearly indicated that teachers at this middle school have made considerable changes in formative and summative assessment practices. Assessment intertwines with the focus on learning targets, as assessments in a proficiency model measure student achievement of the learning targets. The school district under study received a grant from the Nike School Innovation Fund to “create content area specific learning targets, design lesson plans that address these targets, and provide students with descriptive feedback regarding their school work” (Pacific Research and Evaluation, 2011, p. 1). The five goals established as part of the grant included:

- To establish clear learning targets
- To link student assessment with learning targets
- To provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency
- To provide students with clear communication regarding their learning
- To achieve a balance between formative and summative assessment practices

Professional development funds included in the grant allowed teachers to receive training on formative assessment practices. The overarching goal was to provide clearer feedback as to where the students are at in meeting the learning targets and also to provide information to guide future teaching practice. As part of the training, teachers learned how to create rubrics to use for summative assessment.

Formative assessment.

A total of 9 out of 10 teachers interviewed indicated they are now using formative assessment practices in their classrooms. For P4, formative assessments have allowed her to modify instruction as she sees weak areas of learning. She says that meaningful feedback has allowed her students to focus on what they need to do to meet the target. P7 stated that formative assessments allow her to see more quickly where mistakes are being made, and correcting those gaps before the final assessment. P3 has used formative assessments to assess where her special education students are in their learning as compared to the regular education curriculum. In fact, she considers most of the work “formative” until the final assessments are made at the end of the quarter. “If proficiency is the end product, then I shouldn’t enter grades before the end product,” she noted.

To support the formative process, the administrators at the school have focused staff development and PLC work on expanding knowledge on formative practices. P9, the assistant principal, stated that his major goal as a coach is helping teachers bring in formative assessment tools. He sees more and more daily formative assessments, but he still feels there is room for growth, especially in making the assessments creative and non-repetitive. When asked about formative assessments, the principal of the school said the engagement piece is much higher, and formative practices are increasing. Now, in working with teachers, he is leading discussions on what is the best way to use the information the teachers are getting. He feels the school needs more teacher collaboration time to fine-tune these practices now that the teachers “have their feet into formative assessment.” In mastery learning, you get help to fill the gap, but how do you cover the curriculum while servicing those who are still behind? According to the principal, this is one of the key questions that are being addressed in staff meetings.

The personal interviews indicate that formative assessment seems to be improving instructional practice as well. For P5, formative assessment helps her as much as it helps her students. “We are paying better attention to what students know and don’t know yet,” she reflected. “I don’t know if I put as much thought into the assessment process as I am now,” added P7. She has come up with smaller assessments to gauge learning before the final test, so “I can give more information back to the student as to where they are at.” P4, one of the content facilitators, said that the staff is getting so much more information and can place students along a ladder of proficiency, but analyzing these data as a team is time-consuming and challenging. “Formative practice has a very good purpose, but knowing what to do with it is overwhelming. How do I adjust my teaching once I know where students are at? How do I differentiate?” For the staff at this school, differentiation within such large class sizes is a significant challenge. For P3, the classroom is not set up for teaching at different paces, where students get individualized instruction. For her, she is constantly trying to seek balance between meeting student needs and going forward with the expected curriculum. Despite these challenges, teachers spoke very positively about including formative assessments as part of their instructional practice. P7 was very enthusiastic about the whole new assessment process. “Just do it,” she said. “I know more than I ever knew about my students, and these last three years have been the most gratifying thing of my career.”

Summative assessment.

Summative assessments also changed as part of the transition to proficiency-based instructional practices. Professional development focused on bringing teachers together to develop common rubrics to be used throughout the district. Teachers identified key standards for their subject and developed assessments to match the learning target. For some teachers, this

meant completely re-vamping their assessment process. P13, a physical education teacher, stated, “I know people who had to completely change the assessments for their class; some people had to create all new assessment tools to account for the proficiency system. It also got many of the PE teachers to come up with some rubrics that are more suited for a proficiency-based system and that are kid-friendly and easy to use.” P7 said the training completely changed how she graded assessments. “It comes down to how I am assessing, no points, more holistically; I am assessing their skill level on a rubric.” P8 believes that summative assessments using a rubric are more accurate, and the students are also more focused on what they need to do to achieve at a higher level. “I used to do points, weighted points. But it was subjective. Why did a student get a 7 out of 10? [Now] it’s changing. I am showing strong and weak examples. Students practice scoring rubrics and score each other’s work.”

The assistant principal stated that rubrics are a central piece of the new system, and a great deal of collaborative work time is used having conversations about rubric grading. Some teachers are using the district-created rubrics, but they often have to be modified because they are too wordy or are not specific enough. As a result, PLC time is spent creating and modifying rubrics for a specific subject and grade level. One concern in Humanities courses is that there are so many standards that a teacher cannot fit in all of them. One piece of advice that came from P11 was “Don’t try to score for too many learning targets. You are a professional and can decide what learning targets have more priority than others.” P11 also advised, “Make sure you have decent rubrics in place before you start, rubrics that are modified for your own class and students. It’s what guides your whole instruction.”

One important aspect of the new assessment process is allowing multiple opportunities to reach proficiency before a summative judgment is made. P6 feels that this is a very positive

aspect about the new system, for he sees less students giving up because their grade is too low to recover by the end of the quarter. “When they come up to me and say ‘I’d really like to take that again,’ I say ‘absolutely.’ I don’t give them the same assessment, but it’s on the same learning target.” For P4, now “the door to learning never closes” because there are multiple opportunities to demonstrate skills or knowledge. Still, one of the challenges is requiring students to show they have completed additional practice before re-taking the assessment. One of the questions that arose in P4’s PLC was, for multiple opportunities, how much is teacher driven, and how much is student driven? Should a student be able to re-take an assessment without putting in any extra time or effort? P5 said that her PLC has come up with additional practice activities for students to complete before re-taking an assessment. P10 reflected that students do come in for re-takes, but not as many take advantage of second opportunities as she hoped. In her experience, more students re-do projects than tests, because her projects are scored on multiple learning targets. Although some teachers indicated that multiple opportunities created additional work for them, every teacher who was interviewed embraced this philosophy as part of proficiency-based instruction.

The only negative concerns that came back about the assessment process were connected with homework. A shift in the purpose and function of homework is integral to the new assessment process. Since homework is considered practice and does not factor into the final grade, the challenge has been to help students understand the importance of doing the practice work. P10 said that she is constantly trying to connect practice with the assessments and emphasize to students that if they do not do the homework, they will not do well on the assessment. P5 concurred:

Homework is about learning to prepare for the assessment. People feared that less people would be doing their homework. I have the same amount of kids doing homework as before. The challenge is getting them to understand that the real reason to do homework is not to earn points....The real reason is to practice and prepare for assessments to demonstrate knowledge and skills.

When asked about homework, the principal believes that his staff must make sure that homework is all tied into the assessments. “There is something incorrect in the system if they can get highly proficient on assessments when they don’t do the homework. We have to really align what we assign with what we measure.” At staff meetings, there have been numerous discussions around homework. Should a student have to do 80 questions if they get it after 10? The principal believes that the next step in proficiency is fine-tuning the process to make homework assignments more valued.

While the interviews showed that overall, teachers were happy with the new formative and summative assessments, there were numerous comments made by teachers that they were concerned that late work does not count in the final grade. For P10, it has become a logistical issue because all work must be accepted late as part of the new grading model. “ I have a difficult time on turn-in rates, and I constantly nag them for late work. Also I get a lot of late assignments. On grading day I am grading tons and tons of make up work.” P11 had a similar comment: “Kids who are going to do the work do it regardless of what system you are using, but I am concerned that students are getting the message that late doesn’t matter.” In P11’s mind, career readiness skills, like responsibility, are important and shouldn’t be completely abandoned. P7 was particularly concerned about late work: “Now, not having deadlines, how does that prepare them for college and a career?....It has been the hardest pill to swallow.” P4 had an

opposite opinion, in that in traditional grading, she saw many students achieve high grades because of homework completion when they really did not demonstrate the knowledge and skills to get an A grade. As an example, she shared a comment from a high-achieving student about proficiency: “We actually have to work for our grades now.”

District-wide changes in assessments.

District survey data also indicates that teachers in this district have made many changes in assessment practices (Pacific Research and Evaluation, 2011). When middle school teachers were asked about what impact the new learning system has had on their teaching, numerous teachers indicated that their assessments are more specific and meaningful, and they provide more specific information as to where students are at in their learning. One teacher wrote, “The quality of my formative and summative assessments has skyrocketed.” Another teacher commented, “My assessments have become more focused on specific skills and concepts so that I can be assured of exactly what the student knows and is able to do.” For one teacher, the change has resulted in a great deal of professional growth in the type and quality of assessments, even though this person is a veteran teacher. Many comments by participants in the survey touted the positive impact of formative assessments. For example, one teacher believes that formative assessments have increased motivation and engagement in the classroom:

It’s been eye opening to see students involved and excited about learning. They love setting goals and accomplishing them. The best has been formative assessments. I have always practiced informal assessing, but not to the extent I do now. It is meaningful, deliberate, and precise. It has allowed me to see where my students are daily in all seven preps that I teach. It has been so wonderful for

them to know what they are expected to learn and what the expected outcome is in class.

Another teacher had similar comments, saying that formative assessment was one of the most important changes made in the new system. “I have realized that students are the most important stakeholders who receive feedback, and the quality and quantity of [that] feedback matters.”

Quantitative survey data from Pacific Research and Evaluation (2011) shows that formative assessment practices and rubrics are also being widely used throughout the district’s middle schools. Figure 4 shows the percentage of teachers who agree or strongly agree with the statement. In many of the responses, over 80% of all middle school teachers are using formative assessment practices in their classroom.

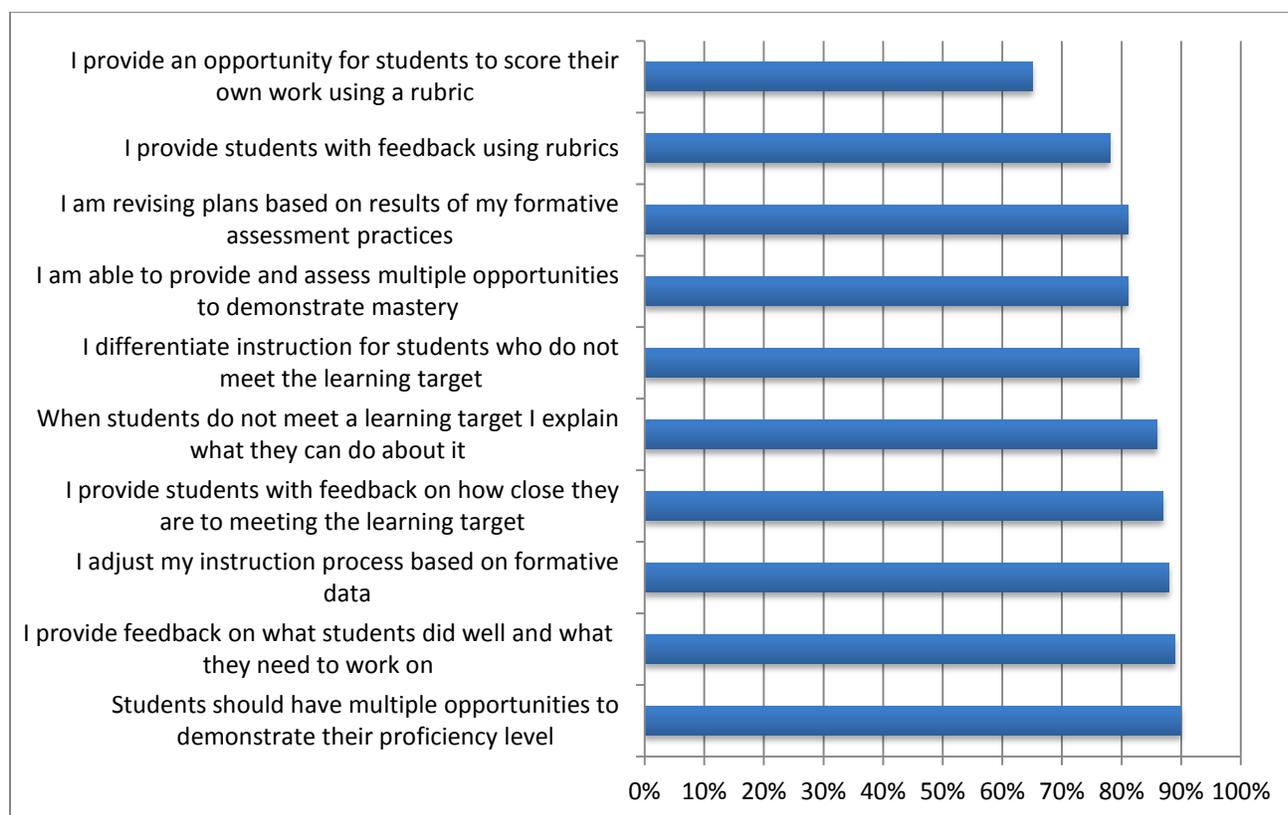


Figure 4. Percentage of middle school teachers who agree or strongly agree with the statement (n=256).

The case study responses regarding changes in assessment practices are similar to the district-wide quantitative and qualitative survey data. Every teacher interviewed has changed her/his assessment practices and believes that these changes have been positive, and there is an indication from the district data that changes to assessment have been integrated district-wide.

Additional Outcomes

According to the principal of the school, the increased focus on specific learning targets, coupled with targeted formative and summative assessments, has had the added effect of boosting state test scores. The proficiency-based assessments allow teachers to identify more clearly the areas where additional differentiation and support is needed to enable the student to grow in skill level. Specifically, data collected in formative and summative assessments are used to identify students for placement in extension and intervention courses. The principal believes that “the weaving together of the new grading system with the before-school intervention program” has resulted in increased OAKS test scores, especially the efforts toward closing the achievement gap. The analysis of OAKS state reading data (Oregon Department of Education, 2012) supports the assertion by district and school leaders that proficiency-based grading is making a difference in test scores. Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state benchmark in reading with two recent cohorts to move through the school. The data shown in Tables 1 and 2 documents an especially high growth number for students of low socioeconomic status, students of limited English proficiency, and Hispanic students. The principal believes that proficiency-based instruction has particularly benefitted students who were not succeeding in a traditional grading system. In his perspective, teachers have been better able to target a specific skill deficit to increase state test scores.

Table 1. *The Percentage of Current 8th Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding the State Reading Benchmark as 6th Grade Students in 2009-10 and 7th Grade Students in 2010-11 (the Most Recent Cohort)*

Year	Overall	SES	LEP	IEP	Hispanic	White
2009-10 6th grade	69%	52%	28%	32%	43%	82%
2010-11 7th grade	84%	74%	51%	44%	73%	90%
2011-12 8th grade	No data yet					
Change 6-7th grade	+15	+22	+33	+12	+30	+8

Table 2. *The Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding the State Reading Benchmark for the Most Recent Cohort with 3 Full Years of Data*

Year	Overall	SES	LEP	IEP	Hispanic	White
2008-09 6th grade	68%	49%	15%	39%	36%	82%
2009-10 7th grade	73%	55%	31%	49%	50%	84%
2010-11 8th grade	75%	61%	32%	39%	58%	87%
Change 6-8th grade	+7	+12	+17	+0	+22	+5

Math trend data were not included due to a standards change in 2010-11, in which cut scores for meeting the state standard increased by four points. However, comparisons between this school's 8th grade math scores and the state average show that the school under study continues to have a greater percentage of students meeting and exceeding the state math assessments than the state average, a trend that has continued under the proficiency-based grading model (Table 3). Additionally, since moving to proficiency grading in the 2009 school year, the school has seen a greater increase in Hispanic 8th graders who meet or exceed the state

standard for math as compared to the state average (Table 4). There is also a clear difference between the two years prior to implementation (2006-08) and the first two years of implementation (2009-11), where the percentage of 8th grade Hispanic students who met or exceeded state standard increased dramatically as compared to the state average.

Table 3. 8th Grade OAKS Math, Total Students

School Year	School Meets/Exceeds	State Meets/Exceeds	Difference
2007-08	76.7%	68.7%	+8%
2008-09	82.2%	70.6%	+11.6%
2009-10	87.9%	72%	+15.9%
2010-11	72.8%	64.5%	+8.3%

Table 4. 8th grade OAKS Math, Hispanic Students

School Year	School Meets/Exceeds	State Meets/Exceeds	Difference
2007-08	49.2%	49.1%	+0.1%
2008-09	52.6%	53.5%	-0.9%
2009-10	75%	57.3%	+17.7%
2010-11	59.3%	49.4%	+9.9%

When asked about the increase in the number of Hispanic students meeting or exceeding standard, the principal immediately credited proficiency work combined with the school's before-school intervention program. He stated that teachers are able to have a better understanding of where there are weaknesses among students in specific math skills, and this data is communicated to teachers leading the before-school intervention program. Math teachers have also integrated common formative assessments and decide on skills that need re-teaching, a practice that the principal believes is filling in learning gaps and raising state test scores.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative case study reveal that there were some significant barriers to change in implementing a new grading model at MS1, with shortage of time and inadequate technology being the most pronounced. School leaders tackled the challenges to remove barriers to change and allow reform to move forward. There were three key factors that allowed implementation to move forward and continue, which were a paradigm shift in thinking about grading, visionary leadership, and a collaborative culture. School-wide consistency and the integration of professional learning communities enabled the re-culturing process to occur. The findings also indicate that positive changes have been made to the classroom environment at MS1, especially a new language of learning, the use of learning targets to guide instruction, and new assessment tools.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The findings of this case study at one middle school (MS1) reveal the challenges to change in moving to a new grading system, the factors which allowed reform to move forward in the implementation process, and the changes to the learning environment as a result of implementing proficiency-based instructional practices. The findings of this study were compared to the current research literature discussed in chapter two to look for similarities and differences between the current research and the experiences and perceptions by those involved in this study. There were some similarities to previous findings but also some key differences, which may offer insight as to direction for future research.

Challenges to Change

The first research question examined the barriers to change in the transition process from traditional grading methods to a proficiency-based grading system at one middle school. This research is largely exploratory, in that data on this specific reform process is virtually non-existent. However, there is a large body of research on school reform in general, and barriers to change in school organizations, so this prior research was compared to the data gathered in this case study.

One of the key barriers to change identified by teachers at MS1 was shortage of time to carry out the needed changes and to work with colleagues during this process. Fullan (2007) identified a critical shortage of time as an important barrier to change in schools. The hectic pace and demands of teaching described by Fullan can be compared to the feelings of being overwhelmed that many teachers cited in the interviews. Since the literature concludes that

schools need to be organized to allow time for teachers to collaborate (Stoll et al, 2006), adequate time to align learning targets to standards, create formative assessments and rubrics, and modify instruction appears to be central in fostering the transition to a proficiency-based grading system. The findings in this case study are similar to the research done by Montgomery (2007), in which teachers reported needing more time built into the school day to collaborate on curriculum development. At MS1, the principal has sought to overcome this barrier by advocating for collaboration time built into the school day once a week, and at the publication of this research, the school board has approved a late-start schedule once a week starting next school year.

In addition, this district offered teachers release time and paid trainings to allow the time to do the work necessary to make such significant changes in grading and assessment. They were able to offer this to teachers because of the grant awarded to the district from the Nike School Innovation Fund, which was a multi-year grant focusing on improved formative and summative assessment practices. Studies by Wiliam et al. (2004) and Lawrenz et al. (2005) also found that substantial school reform took a great deal of time and training. Teachers in the Wiliam et al. study were given six months of training where they were paid for their extra time. Was this level of reform only possible because of money funded through a grant? What would have been different if teachers at this school were not paid for summer institutes to gain new knowledge or given paid release time to collaborate with others in the district? A study that examines how school reform is funded may shed additional light on the connection between grants and school reform.

The pacing of change may also need to be considered with reform to a new grading system which requires so many changes in job requirements and curriculum. In Black et al.'s

study (2004), they found that starting with one or two changes and implementing proficiency-based instructional practices eased stress, and teachers were more successful in making changes when they collaborated with a peer group. In comparison with this case study, some teachers were comfortable with the pacing, while others felt it was too fast. Teachers who received additional training had less complaints about the pacing of implementation. The findings indicate that a transition over to a proficiency-based grading model should be a multi-year process involving training, curriculum development, and support systems. While findings also indicate that starting with teacher leaders and slowly expanding the circle of training was valuable, ultimately, all teachers in a building need extensive training before such implementation begins.

Paradoxically, reform at MS1 continued to move forward despite the shortage of time needed to implement this type of systemic reform. While the reason is not obvious, it appears as if the teachers have embraced a moral imperative for change, and as a result, they have added to their workload and extended their day to allow the collaborative process to happen. District leaders and administrators fear that reform will be difficult to sustain if the school schedule is not changed to allow continued, collaborative work time for teachers. Fullan (2007) has found that some factors that influence the continuation of reform is if change gets embedded into the structure, if it has generated a critical mass of support, and if the school has support systems in place to assist new teachers. The current principal made it a priority to push the school board to approve a late start schedule once a week to offer a support system for teachers. It is evident from the study that proficiency-based practices have become embedded into the structure at MS1, and the school appears to have a critical mass of support. It is still not clear as to if the district can sustain the support systems required to keep reform moving forward.

This study revealed that another key barrier to change in this particular type of school reform was inadequate technology. Since technology is an integral part of school organizations, and it is the tool used for grading and reporting, schools transitioning to a proficiency-based system must make sure that their software is updated to allow teachers to communicate the achievement of learning targets through words rather than numbers or A-F descriptors. If the school decides to separate behavior from achievement, the software will need to accommodate that model. Evidence from this study also indicates that the system hardware must have the capacity to utilize the new software so that teachers are not constantly frustrated with outdated systems that freeze or are slow to respond. The experiences of the teachers at this school show that staff should be given time to pilot and practice the new grading system before it is officially launched as the new reporting system. Since the connection between inadequate technology and school reform is not well documented, this is a promising area of research in barriers to school reform.

While the research of Stoll et al. (2006) and Reeves (2007) indicated fear of change and avoidance of risk, this was not identified as a major challenge at MS1. In fact, the cynicism noted by Reeves (2007) was not present in any of the 10 teachers who were interviewed. The resistance to give up long-held traditions, such as the bell curve and norm-referenced grading, was not exhibited, but some teachers missed some aspects of traditional grading, including adding homework as part of the grade. Holding on to long-held traditions was a moderate challenge to change, but the inculcation of a new paradigm of grading through extensive professional development minimized these types of challenges.

The literature shows additional barriers to school reform identified by Zimmerman (2006) and Fullan (2007) as failure to understand the need for change, fear of the unknown, and

previously unsuccessful reform efforts. However, these barriers were only minimally present at MS1. The lack of these barriers may be a result of district pre-planning and professional development that occurred a full two years before implementation of the new system, which was cited by teachers as easing fears and enabling change to move forward. In fact, evidence gathered in the interviews showed a surprising lack of fear, and rather a confidence, in moving forward on such a major reform effort. Richardson's (2003) conclusions that teachers embrace innovation and change, but need a supportive environment to do so, match the findings of this case study. Data from the interviews revealed a connection between the supportive environment experienced by teachers at this school and the willingness to put forth the effort needed to move forward in the change process.

Another potential barrier to school reform as identified by Senge et al. (2000) was the challenge of external stakeholders. The challenge of external stakeholders, especially parents, was identified by some teachers and administrators as a concern but wasn't as strong as originally predicted. This school addressed parent concerns and built trust in the community to minimize parent backlash, an action that Fullan (2007) identified as essential for reform to move forward. Although the district did experience some parent backlash and thus organized community focus groups to address concerns, MS1 has not experienced the type of resistance described by Olson (1995), and parent concerns significantly eased after the first year. While the principal noted that there is still a small group of parents who are against abandoning the A-F system, teachers and administrators have experienced fewer complaints than originally anticipated.

The majority of parent concerns connect with articulation with high school and college, for the GPA of a student continues to be a primary factor in college admissions. Some parents

fear that removing GPAs in middle school could negatively impact their child's GPA in high school. Only one teacher preferred to keep A-F descriptors as part of the final grade, but her concerns were mostly about how it would affect high school grades. The district has admitted that high schools in this district will not be removing A-F descriptors from grade reporting, but the high schools have made a concerted effort to incorporate proficiency-based instructional practices into their classroom environments. Since GPAs are integrated into the college admission process, it would be a formidable challenge to try and implement this model at the high school level. The principal has stated that the next step is articulation with the high school to make sure that 8th graders can transition seamlessly from a proficiency-based grading system to an A-F system. So, while this new model shows promise at the middle school level, questions still remain as to how it impacts high school and higher education.

Further research is needed that specifically examines school reform within the context of change to grading systems. While there are personal testimonies from individual teachers who have changed to proficiency-based practices, the transition process of whole schools is an unexplored area that needs to be examined to offer support to school districts who are considering moving to proficiency-based systems. Studies of other schools that have moved to a proficiency-based grading model would increase validity to this case study.

The school district under study is a pioneer in the field, and principals from other schools within the vicinity have visited MS1 to seek guidance for similar transitions. At this time, recommendations are person-to-person, and there is nothing printed to guide principals in the transition process. If current theory is to be put into practice, schools would benefit from understanding the key barriers to change and how they can be overcome to make the transition process more successful.

Factors that Foster Implementation

The second research question examined the factors that allowed the reform process to move forward as the school switched over a proficiency-based grading model. As the interviews progressed, it was evident that the majority of teachers who were interviewed exhibited a significant paradigm shift in thinking about the purpose and function of assessment. The interviews clearly showed that teachers understand the flaws in traditional grading systems and believe that proficiency-based assessment is a more authentic way to communicate student achievement. This school has developed the *shared meaning* described by both Rosenholtz (1989) and Fullan (2007) as a uniting factor that brings the school culture together in a common vision. The integration of proficiency-based instruction and grading into the school identity has fundamentally changed the culture of the school. The shift in thinking can be partially credited to the extensive professional development organized by the district, in which the focus was on re-examining current practices and learning current theory and research on best practices on assessment and grading. Teachers who had the most training exhibited a stronger shift in thinking and embraced a moral imperative to change how students are assessed and graded, while teachers who came into the school partially through implementation or who did not receive the same level of training showed more concerns about the new system. Clearly, districts need a process for training new teachers once implementation has moved forward, so these teachers can be brought into the new school culture successfully. All in all, Barth's (2001) assertion that teachers need to be inspired for transformative change to occur was evident through these interviews. In general, teachers at this school are inspired, and they know they are pioneers

leading the way to improve the learning environment for students, which keeps them going despite the challenges involved in the reform process.

To further the support and training, the district also utilized teacher leaders in the reform process who moved forward in proficiency-based practices which could then model the change for others. This is an action cited by Ellmore (2004) as moving the innovation forward and appears to be a factor at this school. These teachers modeled new values and behaviors, which eased fears and introduced new ideas to the school culture. The district made a concerted effort to make teachers integral to the change process and gave them ownership in shaping the new system, an action which buttresses reform efforts (Lawrenz et al., 2005). Teachers interviewed in the study do not see top-down mandates as an issue here, which is something identified by Lawrenz et al. (2005) as inhibiting school reform. This school is a prime example of peers helping peers in sharing the wisdom of practice as described by Shulman (2004). The district started with teacher leaders, trained them, and then expanded the training over a three-year process to include more and more teachers. Teacher leaders led professional development activities, and two teacher leaders in the building are assigned facilitators who are given release time to support their colleagues. The concerns cited by Waldron and Mcleskey (2010) and Austin and McCann (1992) about inadequate professional development were only minimally present in this district, further fostering the change process.

At the same time, there needs to be a process in place to train new teachers so they are brought into the school culture and embrace the mindset required of the proficiency grading model. Since less than 50% of new teachers stay more than four years in teaching, and there is at 17% turnover rate in the profession (Carroll, 2007), offering continuous professional development, even after the new model has been implemented, is essential. Furthermore, this

district has enacted 37 million dollars in budget cuts and eliminated 344 jobs for the 2012-13 school year as a result of the current funding crisis in Oregon schools (Owen, 2012). When funding improves and teaching positions are added, it will result in changes to the staff and require additional professional development to maintain the new paradigm of thinking about grading and assessment.

This school has also embraced the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs), and the interviews revealed that teachers and administrators see PLCs as both a support system and a vehicle for collaboration and professional growth. Waldron and McClesky (2010) have found that collaboration plays a critical role in the change process, and the findings this study support their conclusion. Teachers at this school feel a high level of trust and respect and exhibit the ethic of caring described by Stoll et al. (2006), and several teachers noted that there is the feeling in the building that everyone is in this together. The feelings of isolation that can hamper reform efforts were not indicated by those interviewed. Although the research on PLCs is still emerging, the literature shows that PLCs have a positive impact on classroom environments (Rosenholtz, 1989). The findings of this study also indicate that MS1 PLCs are having the positive impact on school culture described by Eaker and Keating (2008) and Kotter and Cohen (2002). Now that the district has approved a late-start schedule once a week, the principal plans to utilize this time for PLC work to continue.

The findings of this study revealed that the principal played a key role in initiating transformative change at both the building and district level. Unfortunately, the principal who led the transformation to proficiency-based education was on a one-year leave for active military duty and could not be interviewed. However, every person interviewed, including all teachers, district leaders, and current administrators, identified the principal as a key factor which allowed

transformational reform to happen. Taken collectively, the descriptions of this principal match the type of leader described by Quinn (2004), whose courage and innovative thinking guided the school into a new, unknown organizational identity. Fullan (2007) stated that “all major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change, but it also indicates that most principals do not play instructional or change leadership roles” (p. 95). The findings of this case study match Fullan’s conclusions, for perceptions are that the principal had a key role in transforming the school and district culture. The teachers completely trusted him, for he had the adaptive confidence described by Quinn (2004) that helped the school and district gain momentum and move forward into an uncertain future. In addition, the principal tackled the key barriers to change, such as technology issues, to create the best environment possible for the staff.

One could hypothesize that if the principal was a crucial factor in the reformation of school culture, and he left, that innovation could stall or revert backward. However, the findings in this study indicate this was not the case. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) have found that leaders developing leaders can be a crucial factor in building school capacity, and it allows momentum to continue and not be dependent on the actions of one person. At MS1, the transformation in school culture was so strong before the principal left, and there were so many school leaders who continued to lead the change process, that it allowed continued implementation of the new grading model despite his absence. In addition, the new principal has continued to support his staff and advocate for their needs, such as collaborative work time. The new principal clearly embraces the new paradigm of thinking surrounding assessment and grading. It has allowed for a smooth transition of leadership in which teachers continued to feel involved and supported in the implementation of the new model.

The literature maintains the importance of capacity building, which provides school communities with the power for sustainable reform. Capacity building is described by Fullan (2007) as the “collective efficacy of the group” (p. 58), and it is defined by Stoll et al (2006) as “a combination of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support” (p. 221). While at first the concept of capacity building appeared to be quite nebulous, I fully understood it once I witnessed it at this school. The case study revealed a synergy that is strongly manifested in the school environment, something which has increased the teachers’ collective capacity for school improvement. It is difficult to identify exactly how and why this school has expanded building capacity, but it is clearly there. When asked what made this school different from others, teachers and administrators sometimes had difficulty explaining what it was that made their school so effective, but they believed their school was set apart from others. Feelings of being supported by administration and peers, trust, and a collaborative culture were cited in as possible reasons, and clearly, the teachers enjoy working at this school. Their shared meaning and vision propels them forward.

Further research is needed on why some schools have increased school capacity that fosters improvement, while others lag behind in reform efforts. Clearly, this school is ahead of other schools in the district in the implementation process, and it is the only middle school in the district which has removed letter grades from final reporting. One interesting finding from the research is that the consistency among teachers was a key factor that sets MS1 apart from others in the district. The idea of consistency is not emphasized in the literature and it may be a factor in expanding building capacity. The principal fostered a “we are all in this together” attitude and emphasized that everyone had to move forward together if implementation was to be successful.

Both the current and past principal, as well as teacher facilitators, have spent focused time getting teachers on board who were lagging behind in the transition to the new model.

This extra support and overall consistency was cited by some teachers and the current principal as minimizing potential barriers with the community, for the staff was united in the change process and projected a single vision to parents and students. Other schools in the district have teachers at many different stages of implementation, something the principal explained as sending mixed messages to parents and students and hindering the change process. Tracy's (2005) dissertation found a similar conclusion, in that a challenge to moving to a standards-based model was that only a small group made changes to their grading practices, and so they faced more challenges by parents because they were doing something different. Further research to examine the correlation between consistency and successful school reform would be a valuable addition to the literature surrounding school improvement.

Changes in the Learning Environment

Any discussion of transitioning to a new grading model should involve changes to the learning environment, for the primary purpose of our educational system is to provide quality and impactful educational surroundings for students. Research question number three examined perceptions by teachers and administrators as to how their classroom environments have changed as a result of implementing proficiency-based practices. Since district survey data were available on this topic, it was compared to the personal interviews to provide an overall picture of the changes that are being seen in teaching and learning. Findings indicate that changing instructional practices to match current theory has been a central part of the district's new grading model. Research revealed that the majority of the district's professional development focused on improving instructional practices. Changes in how final grades were reported was

implemented after teachers created learning targets, re-evaluated their curriculum content, and changed their assessment practices.

One of the key criticisms of traditional grading practices is the alarming variations and inconsistencies among teachers and schools (Austin & McCann, 1992; Willington, Pollack, & Lewis, 2000). In the late 1900s, state and national standards were mandated by law to rectify some of these inconsistencies and make curriculum content more specific. It is evident from both the personal interviews and qualitative data collected in an external survey that teachers in this school and district have incorporated content standards into their daily instructional practices. Teachers perceive that teaching to content standards, and writing out learning targets in student-friendly language, has positively impacted their classroom environments. Both Davies (2007a) and Stiggins (2005, 2007) have written extensively about the importance of communicating to students the learning destinations and the direction needed to reach the intended achievement goal. Teacher responses indicated that both teachers and students benefitted from having learning targets posted and referred to during a unit. Brookhart (2009) has concluded that the incorporation of standards in daily lessons, and linking grading to the achievement of learning targets, increases validity and reliability to grades. Although teachers in the study did not use words such as validity and reliability, teachers perceived that their lessons had more purpose and direction, and students know exactly what is expected of them to reach the learning target.

Overall, teachers in this study exhibited more confidence in their teaching and believed that their curriculum was more focused and meaningful. Something to take note of is that these participants believe that state standards must be changed into student-friendly language so that they are easy to understand and navigate. Further research with student populations may provide

additional insight into the importance of student-friendly learning targets and what language is most effective to give students a clear path toward achievement of learning goals.

There have been concerns among the research community that standards-based reform could limit the quality of teaching in our nation's classrooms (Harlen & Deacon Crick, 2003; Kohn, 2004; Stiggins, 1999). However, if standards-based reform is coupled with proficiency-based instructional practices such as formative assessments and rubric grading, the findings indicate that effective teaching is enhanced rather than compromised. There is an abundance of literature on the connection between formative assessments and increased learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Temperly, 2007). The district under study has made formative assessment integral to its proficiency-based educational model, and the school used for the case study is using formative assessment tools on a consistent basis. In fact, teachers have changed the way they think about assessment, viewing it as an on-going process rather than only a summative judgment at the end of a unit.

Teachers at this school seem to be embracing the principles of the Oregon Proficiency Project (Kirk & Accord, 2010), transforming their classrooms into student-centered learning environments supported by ongoing assessments and quality feedback. Numerous teachers indicated that the type and quality of their feedback has changed, and they believe that the focus on feedback has really benefitted students. This would match the findings of Hattie (1992) and Black and Wiliam (1998). These highly-influential studies indicated a direct correlation between formative assessment, quality feedback, and student achievement. Teachers in this study perceive that students pay more attention to feedback now that there are no points or letter grades written on returned work and because students can re-do assessments to attain proficiency. While some teachers did provide examples of the type of descriptive feedback they are giving to

students, additional research is needed on the quantity and type of feedback that students are getting in the district's new grading model.

The connections between proficiency-based grading and motivation is an untapped area for further research. Although an examination of changes in motivation is beyond the scope of this study, findings indicate some changes in motivational processes. Zimmerman (1990) has found connections between self-regulating students and achievement, and proficiency-based practices lend themselves to an increase in self-regulatory processes. Findings show an increased focus on self-monitoring by students at this school, and teachers are having students do more self-assessment as to what is needed to fill learning gaps.

The learning loop (Davies, 2007b) appears to be maximized in a proficiency grading model because formative assessments and descriptive feedback are integrated into instructional practices. Teachers indicate that there is more self-referencing and self-monitoring of achievement, something shown to increase self-efficacy beliefs (Zimmerman, 1990). Since Hattie (1992) found that providing students with quality feedback increases achievement immensely, the proficiency-based instructional methods implemented at this school show promise for increasing student achievement. The use of rubrics and goal setting in the proficiency grading model may also increase achievement, for students are able to visualize their target (Stiggins, 2007).

Interview responses also showed that teachers perceive that students are more motivated to reach learning targets because they have more than one opportunity to show proficiency, and they are given direction as to how to fill their learning gaps. This would match the description of the school district in Pennsylvania whose teachers saw an increase in motivation and self-regulated learning because of proficiency-based instructional practices (Brookhart et al., 2008).

The perceptions of those interviewed for the study also match the findings of Tomlinson (2008), who believes her students' self-efficacy improved when she transitioned over to proficiency-based instructional practices. Since self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to influence all phases of self-regulation, thus influencing the learning process (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2009), studies on motivational processes in this new grading model would be a valuable addition to the literature.

A possible negative change in motivation was effort and timeliness of homework completion, but findings were inconclusive. Some teachers were concerned that since homework does not count toward the final grade, and it is reported separately in a behavior category, students have become less motivated to turn homework in on time or even complete it. On the other hand, some teachers indicated that their students clearly understand that homework completion can bolster final assessments, so they have not seen changes in the amount of homework completed or the amount of late work. The principal indicated that the school's instructional practices need fine-tuning to insure that homework is directly tied to the achievement of learning targets. Research indicates that task value is an important component of motivation (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990), and students must be interested in a subject to move learning forward (Wigfield et al., 2009). A variety of factors may be contributing as to why some teachers are more successful than others in assigning homework. A study involving student perceptions may provide further insight into what motivational factors are impacting completion of homework in a proficiency grading model.

Additional Outcomes

An analysis of OAKS state testing data shows that this school has continued its high percentage of overall students meeting or exceeding state standards. An examination of scores

for the two recent cohorts to move through the school reveals that certain populations in the school, such as Hispanic students, are showing particularly strong growth numbers in math and reading. The principal credits the move to the proficiency-based model, for it allows improved communication on achievement of skills and identifies gaps in learning. This information is provided to the before-school intervention program, called “Before the Bus,” which is aimed at raising achievement of capable, but low-performing students. It cannot be concluded that the new grading model resulted in higher state test scores, but it may be one factor in closing the achievement gap at this school. As cited in other research, the increase of student achievement at 90/90/90 schools was attributed to frequent assessment of progress and multiple opportunities for improvement (Reeves, 2004), tools which are now used at MS1 to better assess where students are at in their achievement of learning targets.

Conclusion

The adoption of the Proficiency Learning System at MS1 appears to be significant in showing that current theory and research can be put into practice if certain barriers to change can be overcome and if certain factors are in place to move the reform process forward. Factors such as trust, collaboration and consistency have created shared meaning and inspired teachers to expand building capacity beyond other schools in their district. A visionary leader combined with professional development led to a new paradigm in thinking about grading and assessment, ultimately giving the teachers momentum to move forward and build a critical mass of support.

The critical importance of school leadership revealed in this study shows the importance of hiring administrators who are visionary leaders, innovators, and who engender trust among their staff. Additionally, hiring teacher leaders who also bring these same qualities to a school organization will bring an important, positive factor to schools seeking transformational reform

within their schools. School reform takes collaboration, time and energy, and this school has modeled and used the necessary ingredients to carry out a vision for school improvement and move forward in reform. In this case, it was not about the teachers, rather about the learning of students, which motivated staff to support such time-consuming work that was at times overwhelming.

MS1 exhibits transformative change that currently appears sustainable as long as the district offers continued support to current and new teachers to bring them into the school culture. While MS1 could be a positive example to other middle schools looking to transform their grading practices, the adoption of this model at the high school level would be a formidable challenge. Proficiency-based grading models have to exist within the larger education system which still utilizes percentage and A-F grading at the higher levels of learning. As a result, consistent ways to transfer proficiency scores to letter grades would be needed to offer consistency in grading and reporting.

Despite the concerns about final grading and reporting, the proficiency-based instructional practices of learning targets, formative assessments, and rubric grading are supported by current literature as to current best practices in teaching and have made a positive impact on the learning environment at this school. The teachers and administrators at MS1 believe in what they are doing and are passionate about their belief that this new model is preferable over the old model of traditional grading. Their actions may provide inspiration to other middle schools looking for a new vision for grading and assessment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Personal Interview Questions

How many years have you been teaching? What subjects are you currently teaching?

1. *In front of you is a list of common challenges to change in the process of school reform. Can you identify any on this list that you personally experienced? Anything else that is not on the list? Do you have any stories or examples?*
2. *What do you think have been the biggest hurdles in moving from a traditional grading paradigm to a proficiency-based system?*
3. *In what ways did you receive training and knowledge before and during the process of change? What support do you still need during this implementation process? Are there gaps in your training that are still needed to increase your knowledge?*
4. *Can you identify anything that would have enabled the transition process to go more smoothly for you and for your building?*
5. *How would you describe the overall atmosphere in your school regarding support or resistance to proficiency-based teaching and grading? Would you view your school culture as collaborative, or more individualistic, and why? Please describe.*
6. *Your school has moved the farthest forward in implementing proficiency-based grading. What is it about your school that you think is different than other schools in the district? What do you like about this school?*
7. *Can you please identify for me a few key instructional methods that you are using regularly as part of the proficiency learning system? Are there aspects of proficiency-based instruction that you feel are more successful than others?*
8. *What changes in the classroom learning environment have you noticed as a result of this new model? Do you see any changes to student motivation levels or student monitoring of their own learning as a result of these instructional methods?*
9. *Where would you place yourself in the process of transition from model to the other? Would you view yourself as still doing a lot of traditional grading, in-between two models, or mostly or all proficiency-based model? Why do you feel you are at the place you are at?*
10. *How would you describe the leadership at this school, in terms of leading and supporting such a significant shift in teaching and grading? Are there teacher leaders who also serve a function of leadership in the building? If so, what do you feel about their role in this process?*
11. *Overall, if you could choose between the old model or the new model, which would you prefer, and why? Have you felt this way from the beginning, or has your view of proficiency-based education changed over the course of the implementation process?*
12. *If you could give advice to a teacher who is at a school that is going to implement proficiency-based education, what would you say to him or her?*

Appendix B

List of Common Challenges to Change

- Fear of the unknown
- Concern about an increase in job requirements
- Comfort with long-held traditions
- Fear about the lack of professional development/preparation
- Challenges by external stakeholders, like parents
- Negativity about previously unsuccessful reform efforts
- Shortage of time
- Top-down mandates/teachers are not involved in the decision-making process
- Lack of leadership/vision
- Other barriers?

Appendix C

Administrator Interview Questions

1. *Would you say that the move toward proficiency-based education was more ground up or district led, or both, and why?*
2. *In what ways were teachers given training before the transition, and what type of training was it? Large group inservice, PLCs, small groups, etc...?*
3. *Did you have teachers leaders in your building who were part of the change process? If so, what was their role, and how were you able to support them?*
4. *In front of you is a list of common barriers to change in the process of school reform. Can you identify any on this list that you personally experienced or that you witnesses when the district decided to move toward the new grading model ? In which stakeholders did you see more resistance: parents, district leaders, teachers, or students?*
5. *What do you think have been the biggest hurdles in moving from a traditional grading paradigm to a proficiency-based system?*
6. *How would you define your leadership style? What kind of leadership roles did you find yourself in as the district moved toward this new model?*
7. *Can you identify anything that would have enabled the transition process to go more smoothly for you and for your building?*
8. *What, in your mind, needs to happen for there to be full implementation of this model?*
9. *How would you describe the overall atmosphere in your school regarding support or resistance to proficiency-based teaching and grading? Would you view your school culture as collaborative, or more individualistic, and why? Please describe.*
10. *As you visit classrooms, what is your overall impression of how teaching and learning is different under the new model? What specific instructional changes are you seeing regularly used as you visit classrooms?*
11. *Where would you place your school in the process of transition from model to the other? Would you view your teachers as still doing a lot of traditional grading, in-between two models, or mostly or all proficiency-based model?*
12. *Overall, if you could choose between the old model or the new model, which would you prefer, and why? Have you felt this way from the beginning, or has your view of proficiency-based education changed over the course of the implementation process?*

13. If you could give advice to a principal who is the administrator at a school that is going to implement proficiency-based education, what would you say to him or her?

Appendix D

District Administrator Interview Questions

1. *Would you say that the move toward proficiency-based education was more ground up or district led, or both, and why?*
2. *In what ways were teachers given training before the transition, and what type of training was it? Large group inservice, PLCs, small groups, etc...?*
3. *Did you have teachers leaders in the district who were part of the change process? If so, what was their role, and how were you able to support them?*
4. *In front of you is a list of common barriers to change in the process of school reform. Can you identify any on this list that you personally experienced or that you witnesses when the district decided to move toward the new grading model ? In which stakeholders did you see more resistance: parents, district leaders, teachers, or students?*
5. *What do you think have been the biggest hurdles in moving from a traditional grading paradigm to a proficiency-based system?*
6. *What was your role in the implementation process? What were the strengths of this process? If you could do it again, what would you change, and why?*
7. *What suggestions would you offer to a district that is considering moving toward a proficiency-based instruction and grading model?*
8. *What, in your mind, needs to happen for there to be full implementation of this model?*
9. *Please tell me about the implementation process at (school name). What kind of leadership has been in place to allow implementation to move forward?*
10. *What specific instructional changes has the district focused on in the last few years? How has the district measured if these changes are taking place in classrooms in the middle schools?*
11. *Has your view of proficiency-based education changed over the course of the implementation process? Were there pre-conceived notions you had at the beginning, which are different now?*
12. *What has the district done to educate external stakeholders, like parents, about the new model? In your mind, are you getting more positive support, more negative support, or a mix, and why?*