

Plainville Citizen Op-Ed, March, 2018

What's In a Grade?

This would seem like a straightforward question that everyone would be able to answer, based on personal experiences in school. However; the answer may be quite different in Plainville versus in New York, Alabama, or even in New Britain or Southington. Grades are based on such vastly different components and formulas from one state to the next, from town to town and even within the same school or department at times. Therefore, careful thought and grading policy and procedures must be in place to ensure fair, meaningful and consistently applied grading practices within our schools.

Currently, as in most districts, grading practices vary somewhat in Plainville, especially as students progress through elementary, middle and high school. The elementary schools have been using a Standards-Mastery Grading System for many years. Through this system, students complete work that is aligned to state standards for each grade level and are then assessed and evaluated by the teacher based on their work as it compares to expectations. Students are either mastering the material or still working on it. Others may even be exceeding standards for their grade and therefore, receiving different work that challenges them at a higher level.

At the Middle School of Plainville and at Plainville High School, most students have been and continue to be graded on a very traditional model, with a 100 point scale and a range of grades from A through F. Typically A=90-100, B=80-89, C=70-79, D=60-69 and F=59 and below. At the high school, a grade of 40-59 results in an FS, which typically allows that course to be made up in summer school. This system of grading uses a variety of combined, weighted and averaged grades for tests, quizzes,

classwork, projects, homework, participation, and often many more elements to create an end of marking period grade. Grades are then averaged at the end of the year and a Grade Point Average (GPA) is determined.

Many students at the high school level are very concerned about their GPA, as this is one of the factors that distinguishes them from their peer in getting accepted to their first choice college, or potentially not getting accepted where they wish to attend. While about 78% of our seniors get accepted into their first choice college, we continue to strive for even greater success rates. Grades are important, but we often fall into the trap of focusing on grades for the wrong reason. Robert Marzano and John Hattie, two renowned educational researchers, have committed much of their lives to looking at what really matters in schools for improving student learning outcomes. In the end, the things that matter most include feedback about performance, opportunities to improve performance based on feedback, caring and supportive teachers, grades that are specific and explain what would help students to take the next step, and supportive learning communities that recognize habits of work/scholarship as critical parts of becoming a productive citizen. Grades as currently reported are far less effective and meaningful than they could be at meeting these core elements of effective grading.

Over the last two years, Assistant Superintendent Steve LePage has worked closely with a committee of about a dozen Middle School of Plainville teachers and leaders to examine current grading practices and to look at best practices, supported by research, that are in use elsewhere. This exploration about grading comes with a very specific purpose in mind; improving learning opportunities and better preparing students

for high school and life beyond. The focus of this work has been on a system that measures students on a criterion-referenced proficiency model, comparing where they are to where they need to be in each grade. Grades in this system provide specific feedback about how to improve and give opportunities to do so. The goal is not to improve or inflate grades so everyone does better, but to improve learning, build resilience and perseverance in students, and better prepare students for a successful life.

The Standards-Based Learning, Grading and Reporting Committee has worked diligently over the last two years; researching, visiting other districts, attending workshops and continuously learning from districts who have successfully shifted grading practices. Based on our learning from others around the state and the country, we then designed a model that will better serve Plainville's students. Our plan is to use standards-based grading and reporting practices with all 6th grade students next year, during the 2018-2019 school year. Simultaneously, all Middle School of Plainville students will also begin to have non-academic measures of learning (effort, attitude, preparation for class, positive citizenship, homework completion, classwork, etc.) separated from their academic grades. These areas are all very important to student growth and success and will not be minimized. To the contrary, they will be extracted from grade point averages in middle school and given a separate "Habits of Scholarship" score at each progress report and marking period. A more elaborate system of student rewards and honors will also include these soft-skill, character-based scores, and more information will follow in the future.

Grades are extremely important, because when used correctly as a source of feedback for growth around critical standards, students learn what is expected of them and work toward very clear goals. Students are also less likely to give up as quickly as with traditional grades because scores students receive when they are learning (formative assessment scores) do not significantly affect their overall academic grade. Instead, they are used to prepare them for the culminating assessment of what they know and can do at the end of a unit (summative assessments), which do count in the academic grade.

Given that there are thousands of studies and pieces of research, papers and presentations on this topic of grading, the final point we hope to make is that change will take place slowly and carefully and there will be increasing opportunities for students and families to get involved in this change process. Change can be difficult, but it is sometimes essential when improvements are possible. Many states have started to require standards-based, proficiency grading; however, in Connecticut it is identified and encouraged as “best practice” yet not required. Given the value this system of grading will provide to our students, we believe it is essential to start making this shift.

Please contact Assistant Superintendent Steve LePage with any questions, concerns, support or requests to become involved in this shift with future committee opportunities.