Building a Flexible Standards-Based Classroom within a Traditional School Setting

Bob Janes, Capitol Region Education Council, Hartford, CT
@MrJanesMath, Mr.Janes.Math@gmail.com, MrJanesMath.blogspot.com
NCTM Annual Meeting, Washington Convention Center
Fri, 4/27/18, 8:00 - 9:00 AM, Session 1404
Presentation: tinyurl.com/nctm18sbg

What is the purpose of a final grade?

Standards based grading is all about assessing what we value. In a traditional school system, students tend to receive a single end-of-year grade, and it can be difficult to deviate from that grade (at least on a report card or transcript).

So, what does that grade mean to you? Below are a list of purposes a final grade might have. Number the following purposes from most important to least important. Alternatively, you might just circle the top three purposes. Note that this activity is normally done as a card-sort with slips of paper.

- ❏ Feedback About Achievement for the Student
- ❏ Feedback About Achievement for the Parent
- ❏ Feedback About Effort & Behavior for the Student
- ❏ Feedback About Effort & Behavior for the Parent
- ❏ Informing Daily Instructional Planning
- ❏ Informing Long-Term Unit Planning
- ❏ Informing Intervention or Support Teachers
- ❏ A Motivation Tool for Students
- ❏ A Prerequisite to Pass to the Next Level Class
- ❏ A Factor in Entrance into College
- ❏ To contribute to their GPA and Class Ranking

Once you are finished, turn and talk to your partner about the following questions:

1. What were your top three purposes? Why?
2. What were your bottom three purposes? Why?
3. How could we change the way we assess to target the most important purposes?
4. Are there any purposes that might be inappropriate to include in a final grade, but that are still important? How can we incorporate those into our classroom practice?

What's in a grade? Assessing what we value.

Since standards based grading is all about assessing what we value, let's norm our grading system. I have created four large categories that most graded assignments in our class can fit into with descriptions below. In a true standards based system, we standards would be reported separately. Unfortunately, many schools still use a traditional model that requires us to give each student one final grade at the end of each marking period.

Typically, this activity would be completed with a pile of red, blue, green, and yellow chips that correspond to the categories. Each of chip represents 10% of your ideal total grade makeup for your class. Your job is to take 10 chips that best represent how you would create your final grade. For now, just shade in 10 squares.

Content Grades: Blue Chips

This grade represents a student's progress towards mastery of content standards. This could also be called the "traditional" math grade. Typically, these skills are not very transferrable.

Practice Grades: Red Chips

This grade represents a student's progress towards the math practice standards. These could be seen as an "application" grade. Typically, these skills are transferable to other fields.

Scholarship Grades: Green Chips

This grade represents a student's progress towards the transferable qualities of being a "productive student". Typically, these skills are transferable to all other academic settings.

Completion Grades: Yellow Chips

This grade represents the completion of a specific task. Often an "all or nothing" grade to elicit a behavior.

Once you are finished, turn and talk to your partner about the following questions:

1. What categories have the most or least number of chips? Why?
2. Does our ideal system match our current system? What would we need to change?
3. Does your grading system reflect your classroom practice? In other words, if you allocated 50% of your grade to practice standards, does 50% of your classroom practice include the mathematical practices?
4. Are there any aspects that would be inappropriate to grade, but that are still important? How can we incorporate those into our classroom practice?