

Minnesota Principals Academy -Action Learning Project

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A Tale of Two Grades:

An Evaluation of *Grading for Learning*, A Middle School Grading Reform

Abstract

This Action Learning Project used multiple methods to evaluate the implementation of a grading reform initiated by two math teachers in a large traditional middle school in greater Minnesota. The reform, titled “Grading for Learning,” was developed based on a review of scholarly research and a collaboration of an interdisciplinary group of teachers and the principal. The approach required assigning two grades: a knowledge grade, which was based primarily on student assessments, and a life skills grade, which was based on a rubric that assigned scores for effort, behavior and timeliness. The project evaluated the perceptions of students and staff regarding the separation of the two grades, if they found the changes in practice useful and if the reform in grading promoted greater alignment between subjective teacher evaluation of student knowledge as measured by the knowledge grade and an objective measure of student knowledge as indicated by scores on a standardized achievement test, the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in mathematics.

The evaluation concluded that staff and students generally perceived the separation of a single grade into the knowledge grade and life skills grade positively. Students and staff reported that the changes in grading were useful for many reasons, although most notably because they had a clear understanding of what students knew about a particular subject as reported by the knowledge grade. Finally, changes in practices of calculating the knowledge grade increased the correlation of the knowledge grade and state standardized test scores.

Vision: All kids college ready.

Background/Context: This teacher initiated change to the traditional approach to grading took place in a traditional middle school over a five year time span. Demographics of the student body of 976 students: 51% FRL; 31% Students of Color; 11% SPED; 9% ELL.

Why a change? Traditional grading was inconsistent and “Hodgepodge” including many factors that had little to do with student learning and achievement (Brookhardt,1993; Cross and Frarry, 1999; Randall and Engelhard2010.) Teachers were frustrated that state assessments indicated some students were not meeting standards while they earned acceptable grades. An analysis of grades to state assessments showed a very low correlation between the two at $R^2 = .194$. Teachers wanted to be able to tell parents both what a student knew in terms of the content of the course and how a student was “doing” in school.

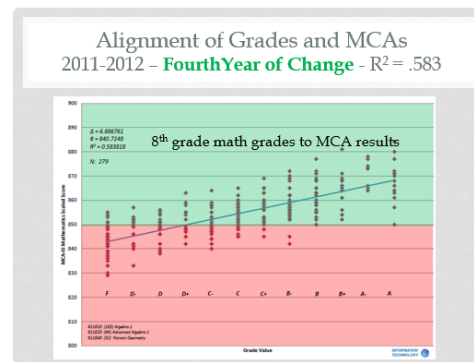
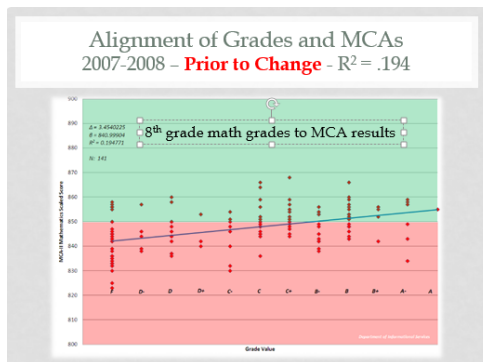
What we did: As a result of a review of the literature on grading and collaboration of teachers, we developed a grading system that reported two grades. The Knowledge Grade was a mathematically accurate “standards based” assessment of the content of the course. The Life Skills Grade reported student effort, timeliness and persistence using a teacher developed rubric. Following the implementation of the change we evaluated the student and teacher perceptions of the new grading system through a survey and focus groups. We also evaluated the effectiveness of the changes in the calculation of knowledge grade to more accurately report student knowledge of the content as correlated to the students’ standardized test results covering the state standards.

What we found out:

1. Students and staff reported high agreement that this approach to grading was better.

Indicator	Students N=726	Staff N= 44
The way grades are given at this school is fair	75.2%	80.2%
Like the separation of knowledge and life skills	73.8%	79.5%
Knowledge grade is made up of enough information to represent what students know	83.6%	86.4%
Life skills is a good measure of effort in class	82.4%	84.1%
Life skills is a good measure of behavior in class	80.9%	91.1%

2. The correlation of Knowledge grades to the MCA assessment in math greatly increased.



Implications for practice:

1. Instructional Practice Began to Change
 - a. More frequent assessments and feedback were given
 - b. Rubric based assessment increased
 - c. Backward design lesson planning became necessary
 - d. Instruction became more purposeful and aligned to intended assessment
2. Electronic Grade Book Was Important
 - a. There was an increased use of student/parent portal
 - b. Accuracy, consistency and timeliness of teachers using electronic gradebook was expected
3. Collaboration was Necessary
 - a. Administrative support and teacher leadership were equally important
 - b. Creating standard approaches to practice required more time and patience as the initiative grew
4. Student Supports Increased
 - a. After school and summer school programming increased
 - b. Teachers spent more time working with students outside of class
 - c. Counselors and Administrators had increased communication with students, teachers and parents about academic progress

