

**MIDDLE SCHOOL STANDARDS-BASED
REPORT CARD:
FIRST-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES AND CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS**

**REPORT TO THE MMSD BOARD OF EDUCATION
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING COMMITTEE**

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Standards-Based Education

The most important distinction of standards-based education is the focus on what students learn, not just what is taught. When planning instruction, the important questions become, "What standards do we want students to learn through a specific lesson?" and equally important, "How will we know if the student has achieved the standard?"

With standards come challenge, clarity and consistency. A challenge for all stakeholders involved in the student's education is to help students achieve at higher levels. The standards clarify what we expect students to know and be able to do. When all classrooms and schools use standards to guide instruction, there is consistency across the District in what is taught and what students learn.

Basic tenets of a standards-based system include that all students have a right to a quality education and that all students are able to achieve high levels of learning. The standards provide a clear, public focus for learning so that the level of excellence is raised for all. In this sense, the standards-based system differs from a norm-referenced system in which student achievement is measured in comparison to other students.

It can not be ignored that a move to standards-based education and reporting structure is a significant change. To fully implement a standards-based education system, stakeholders will be involved in on-going discussion of basic tenets of standards-based education, including: what is important to learn; the ability of all students to learn at high levels; what constitutes effective teaching practices; and the accountability of a grading system.

The purpose of this report is to provide information describing District supports and improvements in response to implementation issues of the middle school standards-based report card to date.

Identification of First-Year Implementation Issues

There have been multiple methods to elicit feedback regarding first-year implementation of the standards-based report card. Methods include formal surveys, input from learning coordinators, principals and content-based teacher leadership sessions, and individual email and phone calls. In addition, Ms. Sara Hagen, a UW graduate student, conducted research on the implementation of MMSD's first semester standards-based report card. Ms. Hagen used a sampling protocol employing survey tools and focus group sessions. Her thesis accompanies this report.

A District-wide survey of middle school teachers, students and families was administered in April, 2009. The survey was developed by Teaching & Learning and Educational Services with input from the Learning Leadership Committee and Madison Teachers Incorporated (MTI). The family version of the survey was sent via Infinite Campus and was also available to families using an online survey tool. In addition, 2800 hard copies of the survey were sent via US mail to families of middle school students. The survey was available in English, Spanish and Hmong. The overall family response rate was 22.7%. The student version of the survey was delivered using the student portal portion of Infinite Campus. 37.4% of middle school students completed the survey. Teachers were also surveyed using the Infinite Campus survey tool with a response rate of 64.8%. The quantitative survey data was summarized by Teaching & Learning staff. Analysis of the open-ended survey comments was conducted independently and also accompanies this report.

Based on the above sources of input, key issues have emerged from the first year of implementation. The key issues are:

1. Grade identity and hybrid grades
2. Clarity and consistency of proficiency scores
3. Student work ethic
4. Technology
5. Teacher support and professional development

In each of the following sections, a detailed description of continual improvement efforts to resolve or improve the issue is provided with lists of specific steps taken.

1. Grade Identity and Hybrid Grades

Continual Improvement Efforts

A summary letter grade (A, B, C, D, U) was maintained in the first year of implementation of the MMSD middle school standards-based report card. There were several reasons for continuing to include a letter grade in the first-year implementation. One reason was to recognize the long-standing tradition of being able to communicate a single mark for a specific content area. Other reasons included the ability to provide information consistent with other educational systems that rely on a single letter grade system, including Grade Point Average (GPA) and Honor Roll. The letter grade in the new system is calculated based on proficiency levels for each power standard. The MMSD middle school standards-based report card is a hybrid because it includes elements essential to a standards-based system while integrating select elements of a traditional grading system.

Because the spring survey information confirms the importance of maintaining letter grades for families in particular, the hybrid system will be maintained for 2009-10. Acknowledging that families need more information about the increasing use of standards-based measures at the state and national level is critical. A pure standards-based grading system (without a summary letter grade) at the middle school level will not be implemented until there is greater understanding and comfort with a standards-based proficiency score system.

Specific steps to provide additional information include:

- Grade Level Brochures (distributed via backpack mail, at registration & Back to School and Parent-Teacher meetings);
- Sample Report Card (distributed with all 2009-10 report cards and on web);
- "What Do the Scores Mean?" (sent to all families with 3rd quarter 2008-09 report card);
- Improved guidance on weighting practices specific to each content area included in the Grading Guide;
- Content-specific Teacher Leadership Professional Development continues to be supported in 2009-10; and
- Learning Coordinator Professional Seminars continue to be supported in 2009-10.

2. Clarity and Consistency of Proficiency Scores

Continual Improvement Efforts

An essential component of building an understanding of standards-based proficiency scores begins with explicit and clear communication of the goal or standard(s) to be addressed. The effectiveness of the lesson and validity of assessment tools hinge on a clearly communicated goal or standard. Part of the frustration teachers experience in this transition to standards-based grading is that assessment measures in a standards-based system are more precise in terms of learning. In other words – an assessment score measures a particular outcome, not an average score of mixed outcomes. To improve upon consistency of proficiency scores, clearly articulated learning goals are required. Professional development and teacher leadership are critical to improving the understanding and design of standards-based lessons, assessment tools, and the subsequent proficiency scores.

Specific action steps to improve clarify and consistency includes:

- Teacher Leadership Teams developed content-specific grading guides in 2008-09. Grading guides will be implemented in 2009-10;
- Professional development to support the use of grading guides is offered through content-specific teacher leadership teams in 2009-10;
- August 31 Teacher Leadership Conference provides multiple opportunities for middle school content area teachers to learn about and improve their understanding of the District standards-based grading system;

- Teacher Leadership Teams will continue the development of standards-based grading systems in 2009-10 by designing and piloting common assessment tools that align and support grading guides; and
- Clarification regarding a “4” has been particularly noted. Increased discussion and professional development resulting from implementation of the Strategic Plan and Talented and Gifted Plan will provide greater clarity around “in-depth” understanding versus “more or extra work”. The excerpt below is included in the 2009 Middle School Teacher Guide.

It is critical that all proficiency levels are clearly understood and applied. In particular, the proficiency level “4” has been misunderstood and applied inequitably. A “4” is an achievable level for many students. It is the expectation that all teachers provide opportunities for students to earn a “4” by differentiating curricula and assessments as core practice. Achieving a “4” must not be connected to additional work or mastery of above grade level standards. Rather, a “4” represents a deeper understanding of the standard that is being addressed with all students.

3. Student Work Ethic

Continual Improvement Efforts

A standards-based system values productive effort, behavior and work habits, but does not combine this information into a single mark. Achievement grades are recorded on the standards-based report card using the power standards for each content area. Information on behaviors is recorded on the standards-based report card using the learning skills section. By ensuring that both achievement and learning behaviors are presented clearly and distinctly, improvements can be targeted toward the specific areas of need.

Families, teachers, parent-teacher organizations, professional educator and educational researchers have long been engaged in lively – and diverse – conversation about homework. There is inconclusive research on the effectiveness of homework and the debate whether schools should or should not require homework swing with the pendulum of economics and politics. It is also noted that MMSD does not have a policy governing homework.

Specific action steps to improve student effort and work ethic includes:

Given the mixed background, research and public opinion regarding homework, the focus of the standards-based report card separation of “homework completion” from academic performance has been to:

- Distinguish meaningful and purposeful homework from busy work;
- Support meaningful and purposeful homework practices;
- Encourage homework with student choice and options to ensure the homework is meaningful and purposeful; and
- Encourage in-class assessment of homework to help ensure student learning occurs as the result of the act of doing homework.

4. Technology

Continual Improvement Efforts

Teaching & Learning, Educational Services and Research & Evaluation staffs continue to collaborate around improving the technology to support standards-based systems. During second semester 2008-2009, all issues collected from professional development, Teacher Leadership sessions, and from IRT work with teachers have been entered and submitted to Infinite Campus (IC). Whenever possible, MMSD staff has made improvements in-house. For issues that involve proprietary programming, Research & Evaluation staff continues to communicate with Infinite Campus programmers to present prioritized requests for improvements. In addition, MMSD staff

collaborates regularly with other districts through an Infinite Campus user group to explore innovative uses in a standards-based environment.

Specific action steps to improve the ease of use and functionality of technology includes:

- Power standards were reviewed and modified as suggested by Teacher Leadership Teams during 2008-09;
- An Instructional Technology Resource Teacher position was created in January 2009. The staff supports and encourages teacher use of technology, including Infinite Campus and report card functions;
- Specific enhancements to IC Grading Features include:
 - MMSD created an application where teachers can enter comments from a comment pool or create their own comments and apply them to specific students and groups of students. Further enhancements will allow teachers to easily apply comments across sections.
 - Many power standards have sub-groups called standards groups (“yellow folders”). Since the inception of IC, these yellow folders have been entered one at a time by any teacher using them. Programmers will create an application for teachers to select the yellow folders from a list and apply them to each section and power standard without having to add each folder and enter the name.
 - For courses with power standards, the letter grade is calculated using a module called “composite grading.” In the past teachers have needed to enter weights totaling 100 in order for the letter grade to calculate. MMSD programmer has written code that automatically includes the composite weight if it is not entered by the teacher.
 - For all courses, a grading scale must be selected for each section in order for a letter grade to calculate. An MMSD programmer is working on code to assign the correct grading scale for each section.
- Spanish and Hmong report cards were created. Beginning 2009-10 these report cards will be printed by Printing Services just as the English report cards are printed. During 2008-09 each school was responsible to print Spanish and Hmong report cards;
- Grading Guides include information that will assist in grading consistency, accuracy and will save teachers time;
- During second semester 2008-09, the Instructional Technology Resource Teacher presented middle school teachers with the use of Newsletter and Messenger features in IC as an additional means of regular communication with parents and students. Instructions for use will be included in the 2009-2010 Teacher Handbook and will be presented during August 2009 Grading Guide/Infinite Campus Professional Development as well as at the middle school staff meetings and team meetings as requested; and
- Since IC was introduced in MMSD, summer sessions have been available for teachers to learn or improve skills such as Grade Book. Compensation (extended employment or PAC) is offered for these sessions. Sessions are scheduled for August 17–21, 2009.

5. Teacher Support and Professional Development

Continual Improvement Efforts

There are three primary ways in which MMSD will continue to collaborate and support teachers in 2009-10 through their on-going transition to standards-based practices. These are Teacher Leadership Teams, Learning Coordinator Professional Development and Teacher Resources. In addition, a one-week Understanding by Design workshop will be offered again in August 2009.

Teacher Leadership Teams

All content areas continue to support Teacher Leadership Teams. Teacher Leadership Teams meet to provide input, develop and improve content-specific tools and resources and problem solve standards-based issues to better support their District colleagues. All eleven middle schools are represented on each content area Teacher Leadership Team. In addition to grade level teachers, members often include Special Education and/or ESL teachers that provide consistent

support to a specific content area. The teams are provided between 2-5 full days of substitute release during the academic year. In 2008-09, Teacher Leadership Teams developed their content-area grading guide in 2008-09 and will be instrumental in rolling out implementation support efforts of the Grading Guide in addition to beginning work on the design of common assessments in 2009-10.

Learning Coordinator Profession Development

Learning Coordinators provide key support to Middle School Principals with respect to instructional leadership. Similar to Instructional Resource Teachers at the elementary level, Learning Coordinators provide job-embedded support and leadership for standards-based practices at the middle school level. For the past 3 years, Learning Coordinators have been involved in professional development two times each month. A District-wide, collaborative planning team has been involved in facilitating the on-going professional development. Session facilitators include staff and administrators from: Teaching & Learning; Special Education; ESL and Bilingual Education; Student Services; Research & Evaluation and the Office of the Assistant Superintendent. A planning team, consisting of Learning Coordinators and Doyle staff, meet on a regular basis to ensure the sessions are timely and focused on critical job-related issues to assist in moving standards-based best practices forward in each building.

Teacher Resources

The primary teacher resource documents created by Doyle staff and Teacher Leadership Teams have been included in the updated Middle School Teacher Guide (2009). An updated version of the Teacher Guide will be distributed to all middle school staff at the August 31 Teacher Leadership Conference. In addition to the Teacher Guide, teachers will also receive their content-specific Grading Guide(s) and updated 2009 Grade Level Brochures. These materials and other content-specific support resources are also available on the District-wide web.

Understanding by Design Professional Development

A one-week professional development session to strengthen middle school standards-based instruction and assessment was offered in August 2008 and will be offered again in August 2009. This session is designed to provide teachers with deeper understanding of standards-based lesson and assessment design in all content areas. Teachers discuss research-based strategies for improving student learning in a standards-based system and have dedicated time to apply the new learning to their own instructional materials. Participants are able to earn credit and receive the professional resource "Understanding by Design" written by national leaders in the field - Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Over the course of these two sessions, 50 teachers have engaged in intensive, standards-based instruction and assessment professional development.

Continual Improvement of Standards-Based Practices

Research indicates that major changes in practice require between three to five years before teacher confidence and skill reaches levels comparable to pre-implementation. MMSD commits to continuing support throughout this critical transition period. As the second year of implementation is approaching, issues identified in this report will continue to be monitored, responded to, and improved in timely and effective manners.

Madison Teachers Incorporated

A working group of MT and MMSD was brought together in spring 2009 to discuss issues related to the implementation of the middle school standards-based report card. The group met twice between March and May, 2009. The working group is in the process of re-convening in fall 2009 to continue to discuss issues and strategize ways to collaboratively resolve issues remaining with the second year of implementation.