

INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

Los Angeles Unified School District
Independent Analysis Unit

INFORMATIVE

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TO: Members, Board of Education
Austin Beutner, Superintendent

FROM: Glenn Daley, Director, Independent Analysis Unit
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SUBJECT: COMMENTS ON IMPLEMENTING A MASTERY-BASED GRADING POLICY

School districts with system-wide implementation of mastery-based learning and grading (MBLG) policies commonly employ multi-year strategies and most began by shifting grading policies in elementary schools first. Most districts with MBLG policies use the term *standards-based grading* (SBG), which entails a shift in grading policies as well as teaching practices. Unlike traditional grades, grades in SBG explicitly reflect student mastery of standards.

Research on the implementation of SBG, though scant, recommends building capacity through a bottom-up approach and suggests the need for patience, flexibility, and sustained investment. Several case studies found that the adoption of SBG policies is challenging, even with the best-laid plans and optimal conditions (i.e., full support from stakeholders). To help inform the Board's discussion and future work on MBLG should Board Resolution 013-20/21 pass, the Independent Analysis Unit (IAU) scanned school districts for evidence of SBG policies and research on implementation of SBG. The findings from our policy and research scan are outlined below.

Employ a bottom-up approach—begin with early adopters and elementary grades.

Most districts with widespread use of SBG begin by supporting teachers who were early adopters of SBG practices. For example, in Palo Alto Unified School District, leadership has backed individual teachers and school departments as they transition to SBG, though there is no plan to formally expand the policy.¹ Other districts have taken similar approaches, allowing teachers to opt in to SBG before making it district policy.² In L.A. Unified, nearly 2,000 educators are certified in MBLG today.

Nearly all districts identified in our initial scan began by implementing SBG policies in elementary schools. San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) recently adopted a district-wide SBG policy after nearly a decade of SBG in its elementary schools.³ After Denver Public Schools successfully implemented SBG in its elementary schools, numerous neighboring districts followed then expanded the policies to include secondary schools (e.g., see Aurora Public Schools).⁴ The same pattern was found with school districts neighboring Spokane Public Schools (e.g., see Fremont School District).⁵ Meanwhile, other districts that implemented SBG in elementary schools lack evidence of any expansion to secondary grades.⁶

Implementation takes time—multi-year, adaptable plans are key to success.

Few districts were able to achieve full implementation within three years, and one case study of a rural school district in the Midwest entailed a five-year shift to SBG.⁷⁻⁹ SDUSD's recent adoption of a

district-wide SBG policy was the culmination of three years of planning and development after 10 years of implementation in its elementary schools.¹⁰ Other urban school districts with SBG policies include Denver Public Schools and Spokane Public Schools; documents from both districts suggest full implementation took 5-10 years.¹¹⁻¹³

Some recommended policies were allowing teachers to adopt practices that naturally led to SBG over time (e.g., formative assessments) and allowing high schools to utilize traditional (i.e., letter grade) and standards-based grade systems simultaneously.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

Plan for sustained investment to support implementation and overcome unavoidable hurdles.

For successful SBG implementation, teachers will need ongoing resources (e.g., planning time, opportunities to observe SBG-based instruction, and continued professional development). Teachers and school leaders will have to engage in difficult conversations about the purpose of grading, and teachers may resist the policy because the transition to SBG is time and energy intensive. To overcome this barrier, some Districts hired instructional coaches to support the transition, which was a substantial investment. School leaders will also have to invest in resources to educate parents, ensure equitable grading policies for students with disabilities and students learning English, and work to navigate the long-held linkage between letter grades and post-secondary opportunities.^{17- 22}

¹ <https://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2020/01/31/no-more-as-and-fs-teachers-experiment-with-standards-based-grading>

² E.g., see Vashon Island School District (WA). <https://riptide.vashonsd.org/october-2019/district-to-implement-mandatory-switch-to-standards-based-grading/>

³ San Diego Unified School District. SDUSD grading policy, current policy - AR 5121. <https://sandiegounified.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=27732478&pageId=31765216>

⁴ <http://communication.aurorak12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2009/02/aps-sbg-comm-plan5-27.pdf>

⁵ Fremont School District 79. *Standards based grading guidebook*. <https://www.fsd79.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=5206&dataid=6786&FileName=FSD79%20Standards%20Based%20Grading%20Guidebook.pdf>

⁶ E.g., see: Elmwood Park Community Unit District 401 Schools (IL) (<https://www.epcusd401.org/departments-and-services/grading-in-district-401-schools>). See also: Sunnyvale School District (CA) (<https://www.sesd.org/Page/1291>).

⁷ Peters, R., Buckmiller, T. (2014). Our grades were broken: Overcoming barriers and challenges to implementing standards-based grading. *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*, 2(2). Retrieved from <https://www.lindenwood.edu/academics/beyond-the-classroom/publications/journal-of-educational-leadership-in-action/all-issues/previous-issues/volume-2-issue-2/our-grades-were-broken-overcoming-barriers-and-challenges-to-implementing-standards-based-grading/>

⁸ Townsley, M., Buckmiller, T., & Cooper, R. (2019). Anticipating a second wave of standards-based grading implementation and understanding the potential barriers: Perceptions of high school principals. *NASSP Bulletin*, 103(4), 281-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636519882084>

⁹ Shappell, M. (2018). Breaking tradition: How one public school district transitioned from traditional to standards-based grading. *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.

¹⁰ See note 3.

¹¹ <http://thecommons.dpsk12.org/Page/2087>

¹² Spokane Public Schools now uses SBG for all grades. See: Spokane Public Schools. *Grading & report cards*. <https://www.spokaneschools.org/Page/1657>

¹³ See also: La Grange School District 102 (IL): <https://www.dist102.k12.il.us/theme/files/Standards%20oBased%20Grading%20Timeline.pdf>

¹⁴ Urich, L. J. (2012). Implementation of standards-based grading at the middle school level. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/12492>

¹⁵ Guskey, T. R. (2009). *Practical solutions for serious problems in standards-based grading*. Corwin Press.

¹⁶ Peters & Buckmiller. (2014). *Our grades were broken*.

¹⁷ Urich. (2012). *Implementation*.

¹⁸ Guskey. (2009). *Practical solutions*.

¹⁹ Peters & Buckmiller. (2014). *Our grades were broken*.

²⁰ Townsley et al. (2019). *Anticipating*.

²¹ Wheeler, A. D. (2017). Implementation of a standards-based grading model: a study of parent and teacher perceptions of success. *Theses and Dissertations*. <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/1880>

²² Shappell. (2018). *Breaking tradition*.