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Implementing Standards-Based Grading at the Elementary  
Schools in a Rural School District in North Carolina**

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A Study of Staff Development and Teacher Efficacy in Implementing Standards-Based  
Grading at the Elementary Schools in a Rural School District in North Carolina

By  
Brayton Leonhardt

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2018

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Brayton Leonhardt under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The dissertation process has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had a chance to do. Much like running a marathon, it is a long race that takes a lot of fortitude and determination to complete. It also takes a great deal of individuals around you to make it through to the end.

Throughout this process, I could not have made it without the support and encouragement of an incredible group of people. Thank you to my two daughters, Emory and Ella. Throughout this process, you have given up time with dad while always understanding what it takes for the dissertation to become a reality. I am so proud of both of you and the drive you have for continuing to be great students. Thank you to both mom and dad for helping to instill in me the desire to continue to learn and work to be a stronger person. Dad, I will always miss you and know that you are looking down with a smile on your face. Kristen, thank you for always providing those words of encouragement and being there to listen when the race pushes you a little hard.

Thank you to the wonderful people and staff at Gardner-Webb University for all you have done to make this process easier. Thanks to Dr. Stedman for constantly reinforcing that I could finish the race. You always knew the right thing to say whether it be that gentle push or those supportive conversations to reinforce or reenergize me when I hit those proverbial walls. Thanks to Dr. Laws for being a role model and someone who I will always look to for guidance or a sense of humor.

Thank you for joining me on the journey.

## Abstract

A Study of Staff Development and Teacher Efficacy in Implementing Standards-Based Grading at the Elementary Schools in a Rural School District in North Carolina.  
Leonhardt, Brayton, 2018: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Staff Development/  
Teacher Efficacy/Standards-Based Grading

Standards-based grading is still in its infancy within North Carolina. At this time, only 12 of the 115 school districts have incorporated the standards-based form of grading into their system. As school districts across North Carolina look to implement different forms of grading to assess student learning, it will be important to look at the effectiveness of the professional development that accompanies the shift. The research questions that guided this work center around the support needed by teachers during the transition period and the impact of the professional development on their understanding of how to successfully implement standards-based grading.

The study looked to analyze data taken from the 2017-2018 school year. The study was conducted in a rural school district within the state of North Carolina where standards-based grading has been implemented within the elementary schools. It looked to utilize these data to draw on teacher feelings and beliefs regarding the professional development. The study also looked to determine the effectiveness of the professional development and what future courses of action can be taken to strengthen future practices. Through the use of focus groups conducted with district principals and teachers and an interview with the district's director of elementary curriculum and instruction, an understanding was gained about the views and opinions of the participants. Survey data were also collected in an effort to gain further insight among a wider population of fourth-grade teachers within the district.

The researcher looked for emergent themes that began to form based on the responses of the participants. Central themes that emerged from the research included the importance of utilizing Professional Learning Communities and site-based staff within the school to support teachers in the practical application of standards-based grading. In addition, findings reflected that participants in the study felt the need for further support in working with parents. Participants also identified the importance of providing support through practical applications including rubrics and scoring practices. Positive shifts in formative assessment were another theme coinciding with the shift towards-standards based grading. A solid understanding of the different standards was a final theme that surfaced during the course of the research. These themes that developed will be offered as a means of providing information and support for future districts when planning and introducing the standards-based form of grading within their systems.

Based upon the findings, recommendations for the district include the development of a professional development model to support the future implementation of standards-based grading. Recommendations also include the need for ongoing differentiated professional development to support teachers and their individual needs. It will be valuable to look at future research and studies into the implementation efforts of other districts that are experiencing success.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Before 1850, grades were a relative unknown to students and parents in the United States. As Guskey (2013) noted, “During the 19th Century most schools grouped students of all ages and backgrounds together with one teacher in a one-room schoolhouse and few students went beyond the elementary level” (p. 68); however, in the late 19th century, enrollment numbers began to increase across the country and students were grouped according to age and grade. Progress was reported in narrative reports that gave students and parents insight into the mastery of certain skills. Around the turn of the 20th century, student enrollment began to rapidly increase with the passage of compulsory attendance regulations. It was at this time that subject area instruction began becoming more specific and teachers set about calculating grades via percentages at the secondary level, while elementary teachers continued using narrative forms to summarize student learning (Guskey, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Marzano (2000) noted the need for a change in our modern day grading practices by identifying that “grades are so imprecise that they are almost meaningless” (p. 1). In tackling this problem, he identified several key factors that have weighed in on this problem of grading inconsistency. Marzano (2000) stated there are three main problems with classroom grading practices. The first problem is that teachers consider factors other than academic achievement. The second problem is that teachers weigh assessments differently. The final dilemma is that teachers misinterpret single classroom scores on assessments (Marzano, 2000).

A large part of the grading component that has been with us for some time centers around inconsistency from classroom to classroom (Marzano, 2000). In assessing the

incongruence that exists, Reeves (2008) pointed out that “practices vary greatly among teachers in the same school and the practices best supported by research are rarely evident” (p. 85). To illustrate this, Reeves (2008) referenced an activity that he often conducts with colleagues showing the disparity between the ways in which teachers weigh grades. In the activity, teachers are asked to determine the cumulative grade for a student utilizing the following grades: C, C, MA (missing assignment), D, C, B, MA, MA, B A. In concluding, Reeves (2008) noted that final grades range from F to A.

In illustrating the impact that the problem of inconsistent grading practices has on students, O’Connor (2007) referenced a news article in the *Washington Post* highlighting the inconsistency of grading within one of the top high schools in the country. The article identified the story of a student who had recently been dismissed from a prominent high school in the district because of his grade point average (GPA). The article compares the student with another who had taken very similar courses, but as a result of the grading procedures in at least two of the classes, one of the students remained, while the other was dismissed. The student who remained with a GPA above the 3.0 minimum pointed out that had he not been in some of the courses where grade inflation existed and extra credit was awarded, he might have been the student who was being dismissed (O’Connor, 2007). This problem is echoed again by O’Connor and Wormeli (2011) when looking at how teachers emphasize the multiple purposes of grades. The two noted, “Some teachers emphasize one purpose and some emphasize another. Consequently, they use different criteria for determining grades, which can result in students who achieve at the same level receiving different grades” (O’Connor & Wormeli, 2011, p. 42).

As Brookhart (2011a) noted in her work with educators focused on grading

reform, “productive conversations about grading must deal seriously with educators’ long-standing beliefs and entrenched practices” (p. 2). In a study done by Yesbeck (2011), the researcher determined that part of teacher perception centers around developing a true understanding of the purposes and meaning of grades. Teacher perception is impacted by their experiences and levels of expertise or comfort levels. Yesbeck pointed out that “in order for teachers to become agents of change” (p. 129), there must be opportunities for them to collaborate and work together to confront the obstacles to identify similar difficulties that are faced. Yesbeck also noted that this was consistent with findings done by other researchers in the field. Collectively, their research findings documented that teachers are ill-equipped in developing and grading assessments that are based on valid measurement standards. In the study, only one of the participants received training in grading practices during their undergraduate work in college (Yesbeck, 2011). The recommendations from their studies indicated that teacher preparation courses need to emphasize measurement theory recommendations in order for them to develop grading practices based on legitimate principles. Allen (2005) echoed this sentiment in his article in targeting the validity of teacher grades:

Teachers give grades in much the same way that they received them because this form has been engrained or “embedded” in their minds. This has led to a “perpetuation” of grading that has gone on for years. Both the fact that teachers often experienced the form of traditional grading in their schooling as well as the lack of adequate training within undergraduate college preparation or staff development once they have entered the teaching profession have led to invalid grading practices. (p. 218)

As Guskey, Swan, and Jung (2011) noted in their research,

Grades have long been identified by those in the measurement community as prime examples of unreliable measurement. Huge differences exist among teachers in the criteria they use when assigning grades. Even in schools where established policies offer guidelines for grading, significant variation remains in individual teacher grading practices. (p. 53)

Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor (1995) noted in their study of 143 midwestern elementary and secondary school teachers that only approximately one half of the teachers surveyed indicated they were aware of their school district's policies on grading and assessment. In addition, most were not aware of the evaluation practices of their fellow staff members. A large number of teachers within the study were found to have individual assessment policies that reflected their own individualistic values and beliefs regarding teaching (Cizek et al., 1995). In assessing the different considerations that impact student grades, a study done by McMillan, Myran, and Workman (2002) showed that teachers use a "hodgepodge" of factors when assessing and grading students. In looking at the assessment and grading practices of over 900 teachers in third through fifth grade representing urban, suburban, and rural schools, the researchers found there were few relationships between assessment and grade level, subject matter assessed, and grades awarded. The researchers pointed out another finding regarding the inconsistencies between teachers and their grading practices within a school.

Along with the variety of factors that go into grading, great variation exists within schools concerning the extent to which teachers emphasize different factors in grading students. The finding that within-school variance is greater than between-school variance suggests that individual teacher preferences are more important than differences between schools in determining grading practices. This data

suggest that teachers vary considerably in how they weigh different factors, even within the same building, and that school and student characteristics as a whole are less important than individual beliefs. (McMillan et al., 2002, p. 212)

While a lack of practical understanding and background experiences ranges across grades levels, some studies show there is a disparity between elementary and secondary teachers regarding their views on grading and reporting student learning. In a study done by Guskey (2009) using a Midwest school district with a student population that closely approximates national student demographics, elementary teachers expressed more progressive perspectives on grading, saw grades primarily as a way to communicate with parents, and more often distinguished achievement from behavior indicators in assigning grades. Secondary teachers based their grading practices on what they perceived would best prepare students for college or the work world, believed that grades helped teachers influence student effort and behavior, and were committed to the mathematical precision of grade calculations (Guskey, 2009).

Guskey (2004) noted that grading is one of the most important responsibilities assigned to teachers; however, most teachers have received little formalized training in different grading practices, leading them to revert back to their experiences as students (Guskey, 2004). As a result, teachers are left to implement grading reform efforts without being adequately trained in both the understanding and knowledge of how to implement a standards-based form of grading (Manley, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Today, a variety of grading systems are used in U.S. education; however, there is currently no nationally mandated grading scheme in the United States. Decisions regarding the grading of students are normally left up to the discretion of the individual

teacher or department within the school or system (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Schneider and Hutt (2014) acknowledged that educators today are “stuck in a bind” (p. 219) and searching for a treatise between the pedagogical usefulness of grades as well as a means of communicating with students and with those outside the building walls such as parents, businesses, and universities. As a means of overcoming some of the obstacles of a traditional grading system, schools and districts have resorted to alternative grading methods including minimum grading practices and contract grading.

### **Minimum Grading Practices**

As pressure has continued to rise to target the reduction of student dropout rates, grading practices have been looked at to confront the dilemmas associated with retention and attrition. Some school districts have turned to minimum grading practices to confront this obstacle (Carifio & Carey, 2010).

In place of a punishingly low first-quarter grade, any grade below a certain threshold is administratively raised to a determined minimum, usually set at 50. Although the student still receives a failing grade, the assigned minimum grade leaves open a better opportunity for the student to ultimately pass the course. (Carifio & Carey, 2010, p. 223)

One component of the minimum grading approach that is sometimes utilized involves forbidding the use of zeros for work that is not completed. This programmatic approach, referred to as ZAP (Zeros Aren't Permitted) programs, looks to “mediate the severe and often-unfair skewing of quarter or term grades that one or two outlying grades can create” (Carifio & Carey, 2010, p. 223). The grades that tend to skew the average tend to be zeros that are given as a result of missing work (Guskey, 2001). Proponents of the minimum grading form point out that in the traditional 10-point scale, letter grade

distribution ranges from a 100- to 60-point range covering a 40-point discrepancy. The letter grade of an F covers a span of 59 points.

Other proponents of the minimum grading practice point out that it provides hope for students who are not performing up to their full potential. They also argue that students should be assessed on how well they mastered certain skills and that a letter grade of an F does not accurately reflect what skills they comprehend. Opponents of minimum grading feel as though providing points that are not earned does not prepare students for life outside of school and that this practice also leads to grade inflation (Miller, 2009).

### **Contract Grading**

Contract grading arose as a key piece of the postmodern form of pedagogy. This form of grading involves the use of a contract between student and teacher surrounding the summative mark (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001). This type of evaluation system emphasizes the individual learning progress of the student, therefore, a more intrinsic desire to learn (Ames & Ames, 1991). Malehorn (1994) also identified that contract grading allows for a mutual trust to develop between students and teachers, provides students with different ways to demonstrate their learning, and allows for a transfer of control from teacher to student with regard to assessment and evaluation.

Another primary advantage of contract grading is that students know what is expected of them in order to attain a certain grade level from the beginning of the course (Taylor, 1980). Taylor (1980) also pointed out, “students are assured in most grading contracts that they can repeat or improve their assignments until the work is deemed satisfactory” (p. 17).

Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) claimed that contract grading “gives students a voice in their learning goals and in how they are evaluated against these goals” (p. 661). In addition, it provides students with opportunities to select “what, how, and when to learn” (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001, p. 663). The authors proposed that the contract method “facilitates the development of a partnership learning environment in which students are likely to retain more information” (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001, p. 663).

Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) identified that contract grading does have “limitations” that must be confronted by those wishing to implement this system of grading. The first obstacle focuses on finding the appropriate amount of structure for the different courses and groupings of students. In addition, contract grading intensifies the demands placed on teachers with regard to the amount of time spent in the development of complex grading alternatives and keeping track of student progress in relation to their personalized grading contract (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001).

### **Standards-Based Grading**

Ultimately, as Schneider and Hutt (2014) pointed out, “Alternatives like pass/fail grading and contract grading would not allow for the kind of systems and legibility that grading had in many ways been designed to produce” (p. 217). With curriculum standards and assessment practices in place, numerous elementary schools in the country began a shift towards a standards-based report card (Guskey & Jung, 2006). A standards-based system of grading is a mixture of both formative and summative assessment data. The grades are focused more closely on student achievement and progress towards attaining learning objectives. The standards-based grading focuses on larger outcomes rather than inferring student progress based solely on how many points the student has accumulated from the completion of individual assignments (McMunn, Schenck, &

McColskey, 2003).

In most cases, the reporting standards are taken from different components or strands that are grouped in the Common Core State Standards for language arts and mathematics. As Guskey, Swan, and Jung (2014) pointed out,

Standards-based report cards represent a significant change from traditional report cards used in most schools today. Instead of recording a single grade for each subject area or course, standards-based reporting requires that teachers report grades or marks for each of the identified learning domains and process indicators in each subject area or course. (p. 298)

Another aim of the standards-based approach is to make grades more meaningful by providing insight into how well the student has mastered a particular learning standard. The standards-based approach takes nonacademic factors such as student behavior and attendance out of the equation and reports them separately from the academic component (Spencer, 2012).

Guskey and Bailey (2001) identified a four-step process in developing standards-based grading. The first step involves identifying the major learning goals or standards students will be expected to achieve at each grade level or in each course of study. The second step focuses on the establishment performance indicators for the learning goals or standards. The third step includes determining graduated levels of quality or benchmarks for assessing individual goals or standards. The final step involves the development of reporting tools that communicate teacher evaluations of student learning progress in relation to the learning goals or standards (Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

Another important component of the standards-based report card involves the use of rubrics to analyze student work and provide consistency from teacher to teacher.

Greenstein (2010) pointed out, “rubrics make an excellent tool for feedback during work on an assignment or project. Teachers and students can review rubrics together and compare students’ work to descriptors to determine areas that need improvement” (p. 120).

Marzano (2010) noted that it is important to have consistency between teachers regarding the rubric utilization and that there be a systematic approach to rubric design. This can take the form of district specialists and teachers being a part of the process of rubric development (Marzano, 2010). Within standards-based grading, the rubrics allow students and parents to “unpack” the standards and visualize the process being made towards specific learning goals (Guskey & Munoz, 2015).

As McMunn et al. (2003) pointed out, “standards-based instruction and assessment represents a significant shift in thinking and practice for many teachers” (p. 3). Hagen (2009) also expressed teacher concerns regarding the shift towards a standards-based approach noting that the new standards-based grades do not “feel right” (p. 1) to teachers who are implementing the shift. Hagen furthered the comparison regarding the shift correlating it to teachers learning a new “language and culture” (p. 1), while also pointing out the importance that certain items do not get lost in translation.

Some experts contend that standards-based grading is a significant improvement from traditional grading practices that have been used in the past; however, the approach requires a clear understanding of the methodology behind it (Iamarino, 2014).

Researchers acknowledge that there is no single best approach to transitioning to a standards-based reporting system (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011); however, in a report conducted by the Miami-Dade County School System, several best practices began to emerge with the successful implementation in districts and schools throughout the

country. The report identified the need for thoughtful and inclusive planning before implementation and the importance of teachers being provided with high-quality professional development throughout the process (Blazer, 2013).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to add to the research in effective staff development practices to improve the level of teacher efficacy in the transition to and implementation of the standards-based form of grading. While the research is relevant for the school system involved in standards-based grading implementation and transition for this particular study, it serves as a premise for other districts interested or involved in the practice of standards-based grading.

### **Research Questions**

1. What types of support are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach?
2. How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?
3. What factors have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?

### **Significance of the Study**

As Blazer (2013) noted within the information capsule created through the Miami-Dade County Public School System, “more and more school districts are introducing standards-based grading and report cards” (p. 1); however, with this push towards a standards-based form of grading, few studies have looked significantly at the efficacy of teachers in implementing such reform. Through the study of staff training focused on the implementation of the standards-based grading at the fourth-grade level

within the school system, the research looked to allow for schools or systems to identify successful strategies or deficiencies that exist within training. The study also looked to benefit district-level officials within the district in planning future training as the district moves forward with implementation of standards-based grading within the fifth-grade level in future years.

### **Context of the Study**

The school system that was included in the study had implemented standards-based grading during the 2014-2015 school year for grades kindergarten through second grade. The goal for the shift to the standards-based report card was to provide teachers and parents with a more accurate reflection of student learning based on the mastery of learning objectives created by the state of North Carolina. Professional development was ongoing throughout the school year in an attempt to acquaint teachers with this form of grading and evaluation of student learning. The standards-based grading practice was utilized during the 2014-2015 school year. It was decided by the school system during the 2015-2016 school year that the transition to a standards-based grading practice would be implemented during the 2016-2017 school year for the rising third-grade students. The district created a committee of school administrators and central office level staff to analyze grading practices and assess where our elementary schools are currently performing with regard to the implementation at the K-2 level in an effort to support the transition to future grade levels.

### **Limitations**

The study could have been impacted by the honesty and willingness to share candid feelings regarding the efficacy of the staff development by the participating teachers, administrators, and district officials. Another limitation could have resulted

from teacher interaction with other staff who already utilized the standards-based approach within the school system. The district has implemented standards-based grading in grades kindergarten through third grade. Teacher interaction and conversations with K-3 grade-level teachers who have a bias towards or against the standards-based approach and have utilized it could have impacted fourth-grade teachers and their initial views of this form of grading. During the early phases of implementation in the K-3 level, some teachers were apprehensive or objected to this shift. In addition, the study was only a snapshot into the implementation of standards-based grading within one grade level in the system under the time frame in which the study occurred.

In working with both of these limitations, the researcher explained that the purpose of the study was not meant to be evaluative or assess them as professionals. The study was meant to provide useful feedback to the district with regard to the needed steps to provide effective staff development in implementing the standards-based report card. The goal was that the data and feedback that were gathered and assessed will strengthen future efforts as the district eventually shifts to incorporating the standards-based report card in fifth grade within the school system.

### **Delimitations**

The population that was selected involved the fourth-grade teachers who have completed the first year of transitioning to a standards-based approach to grading. Previously, the grade level had utilized a traditional form of grading on a 10-point scale. A mixed-methods approach was taken in order to gain both qualitative and quantitative data from a sampling of fourth-grade teachers in the school system. Qualitative information was attempted to be gathered through focus groups and an interview session consisting of a total of nine teachers after the teachers experienced the staff development

aligned with standards-based grading implementation. Two separate focus group sessions were conducted consisting of four teachers within each group. An additional interview was conducted with one teacher from the district. A delimitation of the interview portion involves the role of the researcher leading the interview process. The researcher is a principal in the district, and teachers may feel less inclined to give candid or honest responses due to working with a school leader.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Standards-based grading.** A standards-based system of grading is criterion referenced and is a mixture of both formative and summative assessment data. The grades are focused more closely on student achievement and progress towards attaining learning objectives (McMunn et al., 2003).

Performance indicators include

M – Indicates the student consistently and independently demonstrates mastery in the grade-level standard.

P – Indicates the student is progressing toward consistent and independent mastery.

B – Indicates the student is beginning to progress toward the grade-level standard.

N – Indicates the student is not yet demonstrating progress toward the grade-level standard.

**Traditional grading.** Traditional grading indicates letter grades A, B, C, D, and F based on a cumulative 100-point grading system (Marzano, 2010).

**Formative assessment.** Information gathered and reported for use in the development of knowledge and skills (Marzano, 2010).

**Staff development.** Formalized training geared specifically towards preparing

faculty to learn and implement the standards-based form of grading within the district (Guskey, 2003).

**Rubric.** A scoring scale used to assess student performance along a defined set of criteria (Greenstein, 2010).

**Teacher self-efficacy.** Teacher beliefs in their abilities to organize and execute the course of action necessary to bring about desired results (Bandura, 1993).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As Weaver (2015) pointed out, there is a substantial amount of literature and research regarding grading practices and teacher efficacy; however, there is a relatively limited amount of research combining these two (Weaver, 2015). The purpose of the literature review is to provide a lens through which to see the need for effective professional development in integrating the standards-based grading approach. The literature review begins with an in-depth history of grading practices and how the standards-based approach to grading originated. The differences between traditional grading practices and standards-based practices will be identified to provide an understanding of how these two vary and the justification for a needed change. The second portion of the literature review focuses in on the need for effective professional development to provide teachers with the requisite skills to implement a transition to a standards-based approach. The final component looks at the theoretical framework outlining efficacy, sources of efficacy, and teacher efficacy and change.

### **Grading**

Grading practices have been a matter of conjecture and debate for decades leading back to the early 20th century. As cited by Durm (1993) in his outline for the history of grading practices, Finkelstein (1913) noted that grading practices have been unreliable and ineffective measurements of student academic attainment.

When we consider the practically universal use in all educational institutions of a system whether numbers or letters, to indicate scholastic attainment of pupils or students in these institutions, and when we remember how very great stress is laid by teachers and pupils alike upon these marks as real measures or indicators of attainment, we can but be astonished at the blind faith that has been felt in the

reliability of the marking system. School administrators have been using with confidence an absolutely uncalibrated instrument.... What faults appear in the marking systems that we are now using, and how can these be avoided.

(Finkelstein, 1913, p. 1)

### **Events Leading to Standards-Based Grading**

The shift to the standards-based movement can be traced back to two major historical events in education. The first is the famous report *A Nation at Risk* written by the National Commission on Excellence. One component of the report identified the need for curriculum to be revised, establishment of higher standards, and that grades reflect the degree to which students demonstrate their mastery of subject matter (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). O'Shea (2005) identified the impact *A Nation at Risk* had on the future of schools and the educational landscape regarding standards-based reform.

State content standards have emerged as the most powerful manifestation of the school reform that began with *A Nation at Risk* more than 20 years ago.

Regardless of our views about the future of standards, one essential fact remains steadfastly in place: Schools and districts that fail to demonstrate growth on standards achievement face sanctions. And they are likely to face them for the foreseeable future. (O'Shea, 2005, p. 1)

While *A Nation at Risk* was an outcry towards the obstacle faced by public education in the United States, it did not directly reference the establishment of standards-based education as a remedy for these problems; however, after careful investigation of the existing system at the time, it did become clear that standards-based education provided the potential to mitigate the deficiency of a clearly articulated

curriculum in the schools across the country (Marzano, 1998).

After the report outlined by *A Nation at Risk*, an educational summit was convened by president George H.W. Bush in Charlottesville, Virginia, to address some of the issues confronted by American schools. As a result of the meeting, six comprehensive goals were agreed upon. Two of the goals identified as a result of this report tied directly into developing specific content area standards (Marzano, 1998).

Goal 3: By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

Goal 4: By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement. (National Education Goals Panel, 1999, p. vi)

The summit also began the creation of content-area standards by different subject-matter groups that turned to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics for direction. Much of the funding for this came from the U.S. Department of Education and resulted in standards that were established for the various content areas for schools across the country (Marzano, 1998).

The second event was the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002. This legislation led to the requirement for states to provide information regarding the achievement level for students in core subjects such as reading, math, and writing based on standards. No Child Left Behind led to a “paradigm shift” for educators in the country (Adrian, 2012).

Previous to this legislation, teachers “were not only required to cover material; teachers were required to ensure that students learn what they were supposed to learn – the published standards” (Adrian, 2012, p. 1).

States across the country began embarking on reform efforts before the federal government began scaling back efforts of standards-based reform. In many states, including North Carolina, state-wide initiatives predated the federal efforts. The impact that came from the legislation in No Child Left Behind continued to play a role in public education after its inception. The accountability component was shared by advocates of the standards-based reform movement to monitor progress while holding educators responsible for student learning. Legislation previous to No Child Left Behind involved sanctions for schools that were not meeting performance targets; however, as Hamilton, Stecher, and Kun (2008) noted, No Child Left Behind “ramped up the enforcement of accountability significantly” (p. 16).

After this legislation, districts have continued to move forward seeking the proper blending of strategies that move students towards continued achievement in meeting standards. As O’Shea (2005) noted, “the first response to this focused on the alignment between what teachers were conveying and the skills and topics of the state standards” (p. 16). This involved taking closer looks at strategies, adoption of standards-aligned curriculum materials, and teacher training programs centered around these content standards (O’Shea, 2005).

O’Shea (2005) then turned to identify the additional impact No Child Left Behind legislation had with regard to education and standards-based learning after the initial response:

When the first step was completed, administrators expressed satisfaction that their

districts were “standards-based” or “aligned with the standards.” When No Child Left Behind became law, the increased accountability for standards achievement stimulated districts to formulate a second approach. These actions centered on the high-stakes tests rather than the content of the standards and frameworks.

Administrators looked at the results of standards-based tests and focused teachers on test preparation. (p. 16)

As a result, the discussions of standards in education took on an increasingly prominent role. In addition to the creation and implementation of standards themselves, the standards movement in education caused many to think deeply about grading and reporting practices that reflect student proficiency of the identified standards.

Consequently, there was increasing discussion around the implementation of grading practices that differ significantly from traditional grading practices (Hooper & Cowell, 2014).

Today, the discussions of standards in education have continued to take on an increasingly prominent role. According to other educational experts, the No Child Left Behind legislation had a profound impact on the way teachers had previously graded students. Grades had to more accurately reflect the learning that was taking place in the classroom, and the traditional grading practices that had been used in the past were not correlating with the student performance on standardized tests that were tied to the legislation (Vatterott, 2015).

Currently, every state in the United States has educational content standards establishing learning outcomes or what students should know upon completion of a grade or course. One of the central aims of the standards-based approach is to ensure that these schools are measuring student achievement using the same learning criteria or objectives.

While states throughout the country maintain the same content standards, there are still a variety of grading systems that are used in the educational systems in our country (O'Connor, 2007). At this time, there are no nationally mandated grading schemes in the United States. Therefore, decisions regarding the grading of students are normally left up to the discretion of the individual teacher or department within the school or system (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Of the 115 school systems in the state of North Carolina, there are currently nine school districts and nine charter schools that have incorporated the standards-based grading format into their grade reporting system.

### **Traditional Grading Practices Compared to Standards-Based Practices**

Traditional grading practices are norm referenced. In the traditional system, grades are calculated based upon the average of scores taken from student work and are often summative in nature. The traditional practices in grading also include variables such as student attitude, effort, and attendance. A standards-based system of grading is criterion referenced and is a mixture of both formative and summative assessment data. The grades are focused more closely on student achievement and progress towards attaining learning objectives (McMunn et al., 2003).

As Brookhart (2011a) pointed out, school districts must ultimately decide on the purpose of the reporting system itself that requires a conceptual and practical shift. As districts begin a shift towards standards-based grading, Brookhart (2011a) noted that “Standards-based grading is based on the principle that grades should convey how well students have achieved standards. In other words, grades are not about what students earn; they are about what students learn” (p. 12). When districts are making the shift, it is also important that the system addresses teacher beliefs and traditional grading practices. Brookhart (2011a) stated,

What many schools find as they try to establish purpose for their grading system is that they have to deal with teachers' beliefs and long-standing habits and experience, not only about grading but also about learning, effort, discipline, and classroom management. Teachers who are skeptical about standards-based grading need safe, honest conversations about their beliefs, coupled with collegial agreement to try some new things and see how they inform those beliefs. (p. 12)

Proponents of the standards-based report format point to a number of different benefits. A standards-based report card enables a teacher to communicate both nonacademic and academic factors into the same report but to differentiate between the two. This form of reporting allows teachers to identify student behaviors such as their attitudes, efforts, participation, and work habits while separating this from their academic performance (Guskey & Jung, 2006). Advocates of standards-based grading also propose that the systematic form of grading provides benefits for stakeholders ranging from parents, students, and educators. Reporting on academic outcomes is more accurate and grades are based strictly on student levels of academic achievement. The standards-based report card provides parents with specific feedback regarding the adequacy of student performance. By breaking the report card down into specific learning standards by subject area, the teacher is able to provide a more accurate picture of student performance with regard to the learning standards. A single letter grade of a C provides parents with little information with regard to what particular objectives or learning goals the student has mastered or is having difficulties in attaining (Guskey & Jung, 2006). Others advocate that standards-based reports benefit students and teachers, as instruction can be adjusted more effectively. Sciffiny (2008) provided a comparison of two different grade books demonstrating the discrepancies between the traditional and standards-based

format of grading. In the traditional grade book, the grade headings include titles such as Homework Average, Quiz 1, and Chapter 1 Test. The standards-based grade book identifies grades reflecting particular learning objectives including Objective 1: Write an alternative ending for a story, or Objective 2: Identify the element of a story. The standards-based report also includes student progress in attaining these particular objectives through the work that has been produced. Scriffiny pointed out that utilizing the approach provides teachers with a clearer picture of student learning, and instruction can be adjusted to challenge students who are performing well, while also providing support for students who are struggling to attain proficiency in particular objectives.

O'Connor (2007) provided a comparison between the traditional form of grading and a standards-based grading system, as explained in Figure 1.

Traditional Grading System	Standards-Based Grading System
1. System is based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, homework, and so on). One grade is given for each subject.	1. System is based on learning goals and performance standards. One grade is given for each learning goal.
2. Assessments are norm-referenced and based on a percentage system. Criteria are often unclear or assumed.	2. Standards are criterion-referenced and proficiency based (using a limited number of levels to assess performance on a scale). Criteria and targets are known to all
3. Use an uncertain mix of assessment of achievement, attitude, effort, and behavior. Use penalties and extra credit. Include group scores.	3. Measure only achievement. No penalties or bonuses are given. Includes individual evidence only.
4. Score everything, regardless of purpose.	4. Use only summative assessments for grading purposes.
5. Include every score, regardless of when it was collected. Assessments record the average, not the best, work.	5. Emphasize the most recent evidence of learning when grading.
6. Calculate grades using the mean.	6. Use median, mode, and professional judgment to determine grade.
7. Assessments vary in quality. Some evidence comes only from teacher recollection.	7. Use only quality assessment, and carefully record data.
8. The teacher makes decisions about grading and announces those decisions to students.	8. Discuss all aspects of grading with students.

Source: O'Connor (2007).

*Figure 1.* Traditional Grading versus Standards-Based Grading.

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O'Connor (2007) noted the importance of establishing consistency and focus in an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of current traditional grading practices.

Grades are broken when evidence of learning from multiple sources is blended into a single grade and the communication fails to show how successful students have been in mastering individual standards or learning goals. The fix is to base grades on published school/district/state standards and to report them for each standard to create a more complete profile of individual student strengths and weaknesses. (O'Connor, 2007, p. 58)

In her study regarding student performance gauged through the standards-based report card, Johnson (2001) furthered the importance of using the standards-based approach. Johnson pointed out,

The important element of standards-based reporting is that the standard is clearly stated, the criteria to meet the standard is clearly stated, and that students are measured against the standard, not against each other. Every student potentially could achieve the standard. When using norm-referenced grading, grading on a curve or grading based on ability or effort, the lines of achievement become fuzzy and the meaning a grade holds is inconsistent. (p. 32)

The shift to a standards-based movement has been instrumental in changing the way teachers assess students. Within a standards-based system, assessments are matched to the particular standards and provide teachers with feedback regarding student performance in relation to the standard. The movement has also led to students demonstrating a deeper understanding of the knowledge and application of the content. A transition away from the typical multiple-choice and true-false assessments towards performance assessments will force teachers to utilize different assessments and more authentic modes of assessments. These performance assessments include performance tasks such as portfolios, journals, and classroom observations of student learning that match the individual learning targets and standards (Chambers & Dean, 2000).

One reporting method districts utilize within a standards-based grading format involves the utilization of rubrics to communicate student progress. Marzano and Kendall (1996) defined a rubric as a description of the levels of understanding or skill for a given benchmark and provided an example for how a rubric could be utilized to track the progress of understanding in reaching a mathematics benchmark, “understands the

basic role of place value” (p. 19).

4. Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the role and function of place value and provides insights that are not obvious when using the concept of place value.
3. Demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of the role and function of place value as it relates to estimating or calculating addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.
2. Displays an incomplete understanding of the role and function of place value as it relates to estimating or calculating addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division.
1. Has severe misconceptions about the role and function of place value as evidenced by severe place value errors in addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division.

Marzano and Kendall (1996) pointed out that utilization of this form of grading through benchmarks would require a shift from the traditional form of grading teachers have used in the past. Within this example, a level 3 would represent that a student had reached the targeted level of proficiency (Marzano & Kendall, 1996).

Cherniss (2008) reported that the shift towards standards-based education in an age of accountability has led to a need for a reporting system that more accurately reflects student learning in relation to the individual standards. While standards-based report cards do vary across states and districts, the overall structure is similar. Below is a sample of a standards-based report card utilized by the Wake County School System in North Carolina, detailing student understanding of fourth grade language arts.

4<sup>th</sup> Grade English Language Arts At A Glance

PARENT RESOURCES			
Resources		Video Support	
Grade Level DPI Roadmap ( <a href="#">English</a> ) ( <a href="#">Spanish</a> ) Grade Level DPI Unpacking the Standards		Great Kids! Milestones ( <a href="#">English</a> ) ( <a href="#">Spanish</a> )	
QUARTER 1			
Units	Reading	Writing	Speaking & Listening
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transitioning to Take Charge As A Reader</li> <li>Deepening Understanding of Characters and Historical Fiction Through Higher Order Thinking and Questioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launching Writers' Workshop</li> <li>Delving into Narrative Writing</li> </ul>	
Standards  Note: Focus Standards on Elementary Report Card are bolded.	<u>Key Ideas and Details</u> <b>RL4.1, RL4.2, RL4.3, RL4.1, RL4.2</b> <u>Craft and Structure</u> <b>RL4.4, RL4.6</b> <u>Reading Foundational Skills</u> <b>RF4.3a, RF4.4a, c</b> <u>Language</u> <b>L4.4a</b>	<u>Text Types and Purposes</u> <b>W4.3 a,b,c,d,e</b> <u>Production and Distribution of Writing</u> <b>W4.5</b> <u>Research to Build and Present Knowledge</u> <b>W4.9a</b> <u>Language</u> <b>L4.1d, L4.2a, b</b>	<u>Speaking and Listening</u> <b>SL4.1a,b,c,d</b>  <u>Language</u> <b>L4.3a</b>
Unit Overviews	<a href="#">Quarter 1 Unit Overview</a>		

Figure 2. Wake County Public Schools Standards Based Report Card.

All K-5 students receive a report card at the end of each 9-week reporting period. Student performance descriptions (Levels 1 to 4) indicate whether the child met expectations set by the state Standard Course of Study. These levels also indicate whether he or she has the necessary skills and concepts to be successful in the next quarter or next grade. Teacher assessments include observations and evidence collected throughout the grading period to determine student levels of proficiency. The descriptors for each level have been aligned to the expectations of the state Standard Course of Study for all content areas.

Level 4 – Exemplary: Student consistently demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the standards, concepts, and skills taught during this reporting period.

Level 3 – Proficient: Student consistently demonstrates an understanding of the standard, concepts, and skills taught during this reporting period.

Level 2 – Approaching proficiency: Student is approaching an understanding of

the standards, concepts, and skills taught during this reporting period.

Level 1 – Nonproficient: Student does not yet demonstrate an understanding of the standards, concepts, and skills taught during this reporting period.

### **Conduct and Work Habits**

Students receive grades (1, 2, or 3) separate from the content area for conduct and work habits. In reporting on conduct, the teacher can indicate whether the student meets expectations in cooperating with others, respecting others, and observing rules and procedures. In reporting on work habits, the teacher can indicate whether the student uses time wisely, listens carefully, completes assignments, writes legibly, works independently or seeks help when needed, and completes work. The following descriptors are used.

Level 3	The student meets expectations.
Level 2	The student inconsistently meets expectations.
Level 1	The student does not meet expectations.

*Figure 3.* Wake County Schools: Student Conduct and Work Habits.

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Guskey and Jung (2006) pointed out several challenges in shifting to a standards-based report card. The first focuses on clarifying the purpose of the report card itself and establishing the importance of effective communication, as opposed to simply quantifying the grade that appears on the report card. Effectively communicating the purpose of the standards-based report card allows parents insight into how it can be utilized to relay valuable information regarding student learning. Another challenge that is identified centers around detailing the different criteria set forth in a standards-based

report card. Guskey and Jung (2006) pointed to the different grading categories detailed in a standards-based report card as product, process, and progress. The product category communicates student levels of academic performance on items such as examinations, projects, or portfolios. The process category takes into account items such as effort and work habits displayed by the student. Progress focuses on the academic gains that have been made throughout the course of the grading period in relation to the specific learning goal (Guskey & Jung, 2006).

Pilcher (1994) noted that research points to the importance of basing grades solely on academic achievement measured by test scores, graded class work, or homework assignments; however, teachers do not always base grades solely on these factors. Instead, factors such as effort, attitude, and good behavior are often used within the grading equation leading to an inaccurate picture of a student's true academic performance. It was also noted that both parents and students tend to value grades as extrinsic motivators. The study suggested that the current state of grading resulted in more harm to the learning process, because it tended to devalue the learning of students. Recommendations for future consideration included importance of a collaborative effort being made between classroom teachers and grading measurement experts to address the importance of intrinsic motivators for students regarding learning (Pilcher, 1994).

In a study conducted by Guskey (2002a) investigating the different perceptions of stakeholders with regard to grading, there was variability in the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers towards the grading system. Using a MANOVA model, the study honed in on the similarities and differences in the perceptions regarding the purposes of grading and reporting, the actual distribution of grades, and the various factors that were taken into consideration when calculating grades. The data that were utilized were taken

through questionnaires completed by 215 teachers; 4,265 students ranging from elementary, middle, and high school; and 944 parents. Questionnaires that were utilized for the study were taken from previous research done by Frisbie and Waltman (1992). Within the study, the questionnaires focused on three important grading issues including perceptions of actual and ideal distributions of grades, the overall purposes of grades, and the different sources of information used in determining student grades (Guskey, 2002a). When looking at the various sources of information that are utilized when determining grades, it was found that teachers utilize a variety of different forms of assessment combined to determine one overall grade, supporting the work done by Cizek et al. (1995) regarding the use of “hodgepodge” grading. Parents also tended to rank nonacademic factors such as class attendance, class behavior, and punctuality of assignments higher than more actual academic indicators of student understanding of material. Another consistent finding in the research supported that as a student’s grade level progressed, communication with parents tended to be less of an important purpose of grading and providing feedback to students was more important. In addition, the study also reflected that the different stakeholders showed differences with respect to both the purpose and overall importance of grades (Guskey, 2002a).

While the standards-based approach to grading has a number of benefits, the transition within districts has at times met with opposition from both parents and teachers. Manzo (2001) detailed the shift to a standards-based report card in districts ranging from Chicago to Sacramento. Within the Chicago system, the traditional grading scale was replaced by a report that detailed aspects of student mastery of standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. Within the 431,000-student district, 60 schools were selected to implement the standards-based form of reporting in first through eighth grade.

District officials pointed out that the traditional form of grading did not identify specific skill deficits a student may be encountering that may need targeting. The newly used standards-based form of reporting enabled teachers to focus on the specific skills and provide explanation to parents regarding the grades; however, as the district shifted, there was opposition from parents who were accustomed to the traditional form of grading (Manzo, 2001).

Other districts that have implemented standards-based grading, such as the Osseo School District in Minnesota, have also met resistance. Within this district, part of the resistance was centered on inadequate staff training and implementation. Students and parents voiced their displeasure around the inconsistency that existed regarding the implementation from teacher to teacher. One teacher within the district noted an inadequate amount of professional development, stating, “Standards Based Grading has been rolled out in a piecemeal fashion without anticipating and addressing potential glitches beforehand. We continue to receive confusing and conflicting messages from district administrators as to how to determine grades under the new system.” Both examples provide a compelling need for the importance of adequate teacher training and staff development as well as clear lines of communication with stakeholders. As Marzano noted within the article, although standards-based grading is continuing to grow, those systems that fail to clarify what the new grades mean are taking a step backwards (Koumpilova, 2015).

### **Professional Development for Standards-Based Grading**

High quality staff development is a primary component to nearly all modern proposals for improving our schools (Guskey, 2002b). While a shift to a standards-based grading system continues to grow throughout the United States, the resources available

for teachers have not been found to be well integrated into teacher preparatory programs and teacher training. Often, texts that reference a standards-based approach to grading offer little guidance on the implementation of this form of assessment (Kalnin, 2014). This often leads to a replication of grading practices that teachers experienced while they were students (Guskey et al., 2011). While the standards-based grading format provides positive improvements to the traditional form of grading that has been utilized in the past, success hinges upon an understanding of the methodology behind it (Iamarino, 2014).

Part of the increased need to bring about reform efforts in teacher grading practices was a result of the publication of Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students in 1990 (National Council on Measurement in Education, 1990). These standards were developed jointly by the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association. Two of the standards relate directly to the issues of grading and reporting student learning. Standard 5 states, “Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures which use pupil assessments” (National Council on Measurement in Education, 1990, p. 5). The different skills necessitated by this meant that teachers must understand how to take the different sources of student data to produce grades. In addition, teachers must also be able to express how grades demonstrate a certain level of student performance. As Guskey and Bailey (2001) noted, “Not only must good teachers know the assumptions underlying various grading procedures, they also must know how to accurately put valid grading and reporting systems into place” (p. 12).

The current North Carolina teacher evaluation instrument also reflects a need for teachers to be skilled at utilizing both formative and summative evaluation methods in

determining the level of student learning.

Element IVh. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess what each student has learned. Teachers use multiple indicators, including formative and summative assessments, to evaluate student progress and growth as they strive to eliminate achievement gaps. Teachers provide opportunities, methods, feedback, and tools for students to assess themselves and each other. Teachers use 21st century assessment systems to inform instruction and demonstrate evidence of students' 21st century knowledge, skills, performance, and dispositions. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, p. 30)

Even within districts utilizing a standards-based form of grading, ongoing professional development training on the use of assessment and the guiding principles underlying standards-based grading is imperative. In a mixed-methods study done by Charland, Simon, and Tierney (2011), the researchers assessed the use of standards-based grading looking specifically at how teachers followed a set group of principles for grading. In looking at previous studies, the researchers noted the variance between teacher grading practices within classrooms as well as the lack of teacher preparatory programs for evaluation. The researchers looked at grading principles from a theoretical framework that would be accepted by a community of teachers (Charland et al., 2011).

In developing the framework for the study, four principles for establishing a system of standards-based grading were developed. First, when developing a standards-based report, grades should be criterion referenced to match specific curriculum objectives. Second, nonacademic factors should be excluded so the grade would reflect an accurate representation of academic achievement towards meeting the standards. Third, multiple forms of assessment should be combined to provide a clear summary of

achievement. Finally, information regarding the grades is clearly communicated to stakeholders such as students, teachers, and parents so grades are justifiable and understood (Charland et al., 2011).

Results from the study showed that while teachers agreed on the premises underlying criterion-referenced or standards-based grades, they still felt that norm-referenced grades were useful for factors related to ranking students. Teachers also felt an importance should be paid to nonacademic factors related to work habits and student efforts. Most teachers relied on personal judgment when looking at combining grades; however, this did not always align with the underlying principles of grading specifically in reference to the alignment of teaching, learning, and assessment. Finally, while nearly all teachers felt as if they could justify their grades, the usefulness of the communication with parents and students was not always clear. One common theme of the respondents within the survey noted the importance of “being fair” in determining grades. This supports the notion that teachers feel compelled by a sense of doing what is fair as opposed to relying on sound evaluation of assessment practices toward meeting learning objectives. While systems may be employing a standards-based form of grading, the general principles underlying this form of grading may not accurately reflect student achievement (Charland et al., 2011).

In a case study conducted by Stiggins, Frisbie, and Griswold (1989) involving 15 high school teachers investigating grading practices, the researchers pointed out that teachers may lack the awareness or understanding of how to implement best practices with regard to assessment and grading. The researchers noted the need for teachers to be able to sort through their educational values with respect to grading. For example, teachers who favor a grade that reflects student achievement in relationship to their peers,

favor norm-referenced grading practices; however, educators who feel grades should be relative to performance in relationship to academic standards are more in line with criterion-referenced grades aligned with standards-based methods (Stiggins et al., 1989).

Through the research, the frustration experienced by the sample of teachers was apparent as they attempted to ensure their grading practices accurately reflected student learning. Conclusions from this study indicate that even when teachers adhere to recommendations, their actions may not reflect their intent. Stiggins et al. (1989) pointed out that

even when teachers follow recommended grading practices, their actions reflect proper intentions more accurately than how well the intentions were achieved: teachers try to exclude attitude, interest, and personality, but may or may not be successful in doing so; teachers try to communicate their procedures to students but many students may not comprehend the procedures; and tests are used to measure achievement but these instruments may be poorly designed for that purpose. (p. 10)

As Guskey (2003) noted, the most common purpose of staff development is to bring about some form of change. According to Guskey (2002b), there are several variables involved in establishing effective professional development to achieve sustained and successful change in teaching practices and improvements. First, there must be a realization that change is both difficult and gradual. Making a shift to a new way of doing something requires teachers to expend increased amounts of energy and creates additional workloads. There is also an increased amount of anxiety that exists until teachers are able to feel competence in the ability to make the changes work. In addition, teachers must receive regular feedback regarding student learning progress and

the success of their efforts. Guskey (2002b) also noted the importance of continued follow-up coupled with both support and pressure to ensure proper implementation is successful.

Reeves (2010) proposed professional learning has a high impact when three key elements are met: (a) a focus on student learning; (b) rigorous measurement of adult decisions; and (c) a focus on people and practices, not programs. While initial phases of staff development normally hinge on garnering staff excitement, lasting changes hinge on the recognition by teachers that the new instructional practices have impacted student learning (Guskey, 1985). It is not readily apparent that there is one single approach that leads to an effective movement towards standards-based grading (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011); however, in looking to school districts across the country implementing the standards-based approach, several practices regarding effective staff development practices have been identified.

In a study done within the Bay District of Florida, recommendations were made regarding quality professional development regarding standards-based grading. Initial activities include staff training focused on ways to differentiate instructional avenues to meet the different needs of students in the classroom. The goal of these instructional strategies enable students the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in meeting the standards outlined in the report card. Second, teachers must also be afforded support in determining multiple types of assessments to measure the mastery of the standards. Successful strategies also include allowing teachers to use data they have taken as a means of practice in determining standards-based grades for their own students. Another successful support provided to teachers allows them chances to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers in order to maintain uniformity with regard to standards-based

grading across the district. A final practice recognized in successful implementation affords teachers support and training in different methods to record grades so they can easily transfer to the report card (Blazer, 2013).

In a standards-based grading system, it is important that teachers understand how to differentiate instructional avenues related to the standards in order for most students to reach a level of proficiency (Blazer, 2013). To maintain the efforts of grading reform, teachers need learning opportunities surrounding instructional practices and assessment methods (Erickson, 2011). Marzano and Kendall (1996) suggested that teachers can take a direct approach towards incorporating standards-based instruction in the classroom. Teachers are not allowed to pick and choose which standards will be addressed throughout the course of the grading period. Marzano (1998) recommended that teachers organize the content they teach around the specific standards. The specific standards are selected within units that will be covered and assessed. This is made easier for teachers when the district has developed certain learning benchmarks throughout the grading period.

Tomlinson (2000) advocates teachers look at differentiation as a means of thinking about teaching and learning regarding standards-based instruction. With the combination of providing standards-based instruction with high-stakes testing, teachers feel torn between meeting individual student needs while ensuring that all students demonstrate competency. Overcoming this obstacle requires that teachers begin looking at how the standards impact the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. This requires that teachers look at ways to organize the standards that allow proper time for students to be able to make sense of the goals and skills outlined in the standards. In doing so, teachers must also look at using the standards to meet the diverse needs of their

students while making the content relevant and meaningful.

Another component of effective professional development for incorporating standards-based grading involves aiding teachers in identifying assessments that measure the mastery of the standards (Blazer, 2013). Although teachers dedicate up to one third to one half of their time engaged in assessment-related activities, these educators have not been given an opportunity to gain expertise in this task. This could help point to why teachers feel a level of uncertainty regarding their ability to assess student learning (Stiggins, 1992). Stiggins (1999) pointed out that there is a dire need to enhance teacher assessment literacy through in-service training. At the time of Stiggins's (1999) research, only 25 of the 50 states required teachers to meet certain assessment competencies or complete requisite coursework. North Carolina required no expectation of competence in this area. The complexity of the different standards necessitates that teachers be familiar with a multitude of different forms of assessment tools to ensure that the standards are measured appropriately (Brookhart, 2011b). Increasing the ability for teachers to become effective users of a standards-based form of grading relies on a shift in their daily assessment practices (Cherniss, 2008).

Reeves (2010) pointed out that "one of the most important transitions in education in the past decade has been the embrace of academic standards as the prevailing method for evaluating students" (p. 57). Reeves (2010) went on to point out that this has important implications for educators today with regard to identifying the types of assessments that accurately measure student progress. This includes a balanced form of assessment where multiple forms are used to give an accurate picture of student learning.

Marzano and Kendall (1998) also recommended that teachers determine the sort of assessments that will be utilized for the different standards. This can be accomplished

through collecting examples of student performance on each of the standards. Teachers can utilize assessments involving forced choice items, essay questions, performance tasks, teacher observation, student self-assessments, and assessment conferences to measure student mastery.

Stiggins and Dufour (2009) asserted that the development of common formative assessments created by teams of teachers from the same grade level provides a useful tool in determining student mastery of standards. In order for assessments to work effectively, they must meet certain conditions. First, they must include the identification of clear learning targets that are integrated into classroom instruction and follow a clear progression. Second, there must be a clear commitment to standards-based instruction within the classroom that hinges on the belief that all students can learn. In addition, the assessment tools utilized by teachers must be of high quality. This involves determining the proper method of assessment and ensuring that enough sample items are taken to represent mastery of the learning objective.

Professional development in the utilization of quality assessment is an important step in providing teachers with a guide towards utilizing standards-based instruction (Blazer, 2013). O'Connor (2007) pointed to the work of Darling-Hammond regarding the importance of gaining a clear understanding of formative assessment. In her paper for the Council of Chief State School Officers, Darling-Hammond (2010) stated,

The moderated scoring process is a strong professional learning experience, and as teachers become more skilled at using new assessment practices and developing curriculum, they become more effective at teaching the standards.

The assessment systems are designed to increase the capacity of teachers to prepare students for the demands of college and careers in this new century and

global society. (p. 4)

Black and Wiliam (1998) ascertained that there are three primary difficulties surrounding quality assessment in the classroom in order to gage student learning. Assessment practices often rely on rote memorization of facts rather than a deeper understanding of material. The various methods of assessment practices are rarely shared between teachers in the same building, leading to a breakdown in the communication and a lack of reflection on what is being assessed. The third issue seems to be more prevalent among elementary teachers and focuses primarily on the quantity of assessments rather than the quality of student learning. Thompson (2001) pointed out, “Under a system of authentic standards, the school system invests heavily in high quality professional development for teachers and administrators in an effort to support their work in teaching to the standards” (p. 1). Within this system, teachers provide students with numerous ways to demonstrate their level of understanding in relationship to the standard (Thompson, 2001).

The standards-based approach has led to a continued need for teachers to be closely acquainted with the state standards and descriptors that go along with them. One method to ensure that educators are familiar with their own state standards is to charge them with grading their students directly on the standards (Welsh, D’Agostino, & Kaniskan, 2013). Developing clear and concise performance standards followed by descriptors for each of these can provide the basis for rubrics that can be used in the classroom. These provide a reference tool for teachers that can be used during collaborative planning among teachers when evaluating student work (O’Connor & Wormeli, 2011). Marzano (2011) advocated for a systematic design for grading rubrics that involves a district developing teams of teachers combined with curriculum specialists

to design grading rubrics that assess mastery of standards at each grade level. Guskey (2013) argued that the use of integer systems is a more meaningful and reliable form of grading. While a standards-based integer system does not make grading easier, it does allow the process to be more accurate and honest. In addition to the grade in the report, teachers also provide a supplemental narrative describing the checklists and learning criteria enhancing the meaning and clarity of the grade.

Blazer (2013) also pointed to the need to provide teachers with the opportunity to practice determining grades using their own classroom data. In determining student grades in a standards-based report card, it is important that there is uniformity across the different indicators teachers use. According to Guskey and Bailey (2010), if there is consistency within the scores, determining the grade is fairly simple; however, if there is variability among the different evidences of student work, teachers face the task of determining which evidence provides the most accurate summary of the student's level of achievement. In these types of situations, Guskey and Bailey (2010) recommended that teachers follow three guidelines: First, teachers must look to the most recent evidence of student work. Second, teachers must also look to the most extensive type of evidence or performance tasks. Third, teachers must also look to the evidence of student work associated with most essential learning goals.

In researching the transition to a standards-based report card, finding a fix to grade reporting is rarely easy. Libit (1999) cited the work done by the Corpus Christi school system in Texas as the transition was made. Assistant Superintendent at time of this research, George Witzel, pointed out that "Report cards tend to be sacred cows. When you start talking about making revisions, people start getting worried" (Libit, 1999, p. 6). During the introductory portion of the transition, benchmark assessments were

developed by the local school district to monitor student progress and align the standards to those within the state of Texas. The burden during the transition was eased as teachers only had to note that mastery of a certain skill had to be recorded once it had been observed. In essence, the conversion led to a lessening of the amount of paperwork that had to be done by the teachers while providing a more accurate picture of mastery of standards. While there were initial obstacles within the implementation process, the restructuring of the report card in Corpus Christi ultimately produced the most comprehensive report cards in the nation.

Another recommendation for professional development activities when implementing the usage of standards-based grading involves providing teachers with frequent opportunities to collaborate with their peers. The opportunity to engage in effective collaboration allows for the creation and maintenance of consistency across the district in terms of standards-based grading (Blazer, 2013). According to Dufour and Eaker (1998), building a collaborative culture where teachers are able to work together is the single most important factor in achieving successful reform efforts. One of the most important benefits to having an agreed upon set of learning standards and curriculum is that it provides a common ground for collaboration among teachers within the building (Stiggins, Artis, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). O'Connor (2007) stated,

The best performance-standard setting pools the collective experience of a number of educators who are knowledgeable and experienced. When teams of teachers address performance standards together, they can develop the basis for communicating achievement continua for each standard in ways that all concerned will understand, including students and their families. (p. 68)

O'Connor went on to point out that after the performance standards are firmly

established, teachers need consistent opportunities for professional dialogue in order to gain a better understanding and apply the standards consistently.

Effective professional development in incorporating standards-based grading also involves aiding teachers with effective strategies in terms of time management and new forms of record keeping systems (Blazer, 2013). Guskey and Bailey (2010) pointed out that “teachers want a report card that matches recent changes in their curricula and classroom assessments, but they do not want a form that requires a lot of extra time and effort to complete” (p. 2). When aligning a teacher’s grade book within a standards-based form of reporting, Marzano and Kendall (1996) pointed to the need for teachers to utilize columns within the grade book to represent the individual standards as opposed to classroom assignments, tests, or other activities. The researchers recommended that the teacher think in terms of the standards the assignment is covering. For example, when an assessment covers three standards, the teacher would make three entries in the grade book to represent the different standards covered within the assignment as opposed to one single entry for the entire test.

Colby (1999) outlined a four-step process into making the shift to a standards-based report card. The researcher looked at Adam’s County District in Colorado. Teachers in the district had previously utilized the traditional form of grading and identified the difficulties educators would need to overcome in making a shift. In order to make a change to a standards-based report card, Colby outlined a four-step process to make the change a reality. The process initially involved designing a workable format for reporting assessments of student work. The next step included defining three sets of codes to recognize student performance. In the system adopted by the district, P was used to designate performance assessment, A for assignment, O for direct observation,

and % for percentage of correct answers. The researcher also recommended creating a grade book that provided simple access to each student's grade sheet. The final step involved overseeing the implementation of the system and making necessary adaptations when necessary. Colby further noted the clear advantages of the standards-based report card in the alignment of standards to assessment and instruction with a learner-centered focus. In the study, the researcher noted the ease with which teachers were able to identify how students were doing in relation to mastery of the specific standards. It was also noted in the study how the standards-based format allowed for better communication to students and parents regarding the performance of students.

Miller (2013) pointed out the detractors in traditional grading where assignments become "ends in themselves" (p. 112) and the shift that was made to embrace a standards-based approach. The researcher explained the breakthrough that occurred when the grade book was designed with standards as the assignments with a move towards mastery of each standard represented numerically ranging from zero to 10. Miller also noted,

When the goal is mastery of standards, it doesn't matter that students might not complete exactly the same assignments or exactly the same number of assignments because the focus is on what the student is learning rather than how much the student is doing. A standards-based approach to assessment still holds students accountable for the work they need to do to make progress, but it leaves teachers free to individualize and leaves students free to concentrate on learning. (p. 112)

An important component in many proposals for educational change centers on high quality professional development. Teachers are drawn to professional development

opportunities that will expand their knowledge and enhance their feelings of effectiveness (Guskey, 2002b). Transitions are psychological processes that one goes through in order to come to terms with a new situation. Bridges (2009) pointed out,

The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending that you will have to make to leave that old situation behind. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Nothing so undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs. (p. 5)

Problems all require people in the organization not just to do their work differently but to think differently about the nature and purposes of their work (Elmore, 2002). As McMunn et al. (2003) noted, “standards-based instruction and assessment represents a significant shift in thinking and practice for many teachers. Creating a professional culture where teachers are viewed as reflective learners is difficult for many districts and schools” (p. 3).

### **Efficacy**

Self-efficacy perceptions are appraisals of the level or type of performance one can achieve in a given encounter. People perceptions of their capabilities for performance, or self-efficacy perceptions, are a cognitive mechanism underlying behavioral change (Cervone, 2000). Individuals are more likely to endure in their efforts when they have a more powerful level of perceived efficacy (Bandura, 1982). A large proportion of teacher efficacy research derives their conceptions from Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, identified as an individual's judgment of their ability to complete future actions (Ross, 1995). Bandura (1977) hypothesized that the four primary sources

related to an individual's level of efficacy are performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states.

Mastery experiences deal primarily with an individual's performance accomplishments. With initial levels of success or mastery comes a heightened level of efficacy. Once an individual believes they have a strong level of efficacy in a given task, the negative impact of failures tends to be reduced. In addition, occasional failures that are encountered and overcome by success ultimately strengthen the level of efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Mastery experiences are the strongest source for a person's feelings of efficacy. When an individual perceives they have performed well in a given situation, the level of efficacy rises. This lends itself to future expectations for success in similar situations (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).

Vicarious experiences center around observing other individuals perform a given task. Efficacy expectations can be raised when individuals observe others execute tasks successfully leading them to conclude that they too have the ability to master similar activities (Bandura, 1982). When looking at the aspect of vicarious experience on teacher self-efficacy, the effect on the observer is impacted by the level at which they are able to identify with the model. When the observer is able to closely identify with the model, the self-efficacy of the observer is increased; however, if there are discrepancies in terms such items as levels of experience or training, the observer's self-efficacy beliefs may not be enhanced even if the demonstration is performed competently. Activities such as discussion among teachers, workshops, professional development opportunities, and feedback about achievement can impact teacher actions (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).

Verbal persuasion includes verbal input from others such as colleagues or

supervisors that serves to strengthen a person's belief that he or she possesses the capability to achieve a desired performance. Teachers normally receive persuasion in the form of staff training providing knowledge of a new strategy (Tschannen-Moran & McMasters, 2009). People are led to believe they can overcome difficult tasks that have impeded them in the past through the positive encouragement of others. People who are socially persuaded that they possess the capabilities to master difficult situations and are provided with provisional aids for effective action are likely to mobilize greater effort than those who receive only the performance aids (Bandura, 1977). While verbal persuasion alone is not likely to make marked differences in organizational change, when coupled with models of success and positive direct experience, it can influence the collective efficacy beliefs of a faculty (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004).

Physiological states center around the emotional arousal that is developed as a result of given situations. In general, stressful situations have a tendency to trigger emotional responses that can impact a sense of self-efficacy in dealing with difficult situations. High levels of stress or arousal about a given situation tend to debilitate levels of success (Bandura, 1977).

### **Sources for Efficacy**

The perception of self-efficacy lies in an individual's judgment of how well one can perform courses of action needed to deal with potential situations. Bandura (1982) noted that an individual's perception of self-efficacy centers around judgments of how well one can perform different actions to deal with prospective situations. Bandura (1993) noted that there is a large discrepancy between having knowledge and skills and the ability to utilize them under stressful situations. Individual performance accomplishments necessitate both the skills and self-beliefs associated with efficacy.

Therefore, an individual possessing the exact knowledge and skills may perform poorly, adequately, or extraordinarily depending on the variations in self-efficacy. People who perform poorly may do so because they lack the requisite skills or because they lack the feelings of self-efficacy to do so (Bandura, 1993). Bandura (1982) also pointed out that times of immediate changing conditions call for a need for a greater commitment to shared purposes. In order for these changes to occur, there must be a shared effort on the part of people who have the requisite skills and collective sense of collective efficacy to shape the future direction of the organization.

According to Bandura (1993), future courses of action are initially formulated in thought leading to anticipatory future scenarios. Individuals with a high level of self-efficacy envision themselves being successful in potential scenarios they may encounter in their future. Alternatively, those who are grounded in doubt of their individual efficacy focus on the things that can go wrong. Bandura (1993) pointed out,

There is a marked difference between those possessing knowledge and skills and being able to use them under taxing conditions. Personal accomplishments require not only skills but self-beliefs of efficacy to use them well. Hence, a person with the same knowledge and skills may perform poorly, adequately, or extraordinary depending on fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking. (p. 119)

### **Teacher Efficacy**

Teacher efficacy is a subcategory of self-efficacy and applies to one's beliefs concerning proficiency in performing certain actions resulting in student learning. Teacher efficacy is an integral variable in forecasting teacher practice and student outcomes. Research proposes that feelings of efficacy supplant teachers with the faith or belief to take the risk of learning difficult professional strategies and continue with them

through the implementation dip (Ross, 1994). Teacher sense of efficacy has also been related to student outcomes such as achievement, motivation, and students' own sense of efficacy. Teacher perceptions regarding their beliefs in their individual practices is the largest predictor of individual change. Teachers with a greater level of self-efficacy are more inclined to change teaching practices as a result of staff development opportunities (Smylie, 1988).

Teachers who demonstrate a stronger sense of efficacy are more susceptible to new ideas and are more open to experiment with new methods of teaching (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Guskey (1988) investigated the relationship between teacher perceptions and attitudes toward the implementation of new instructional strategies. In an exploratory study, data were gathered through questionnaires using a sample of 120 elementary and secondary teachers after a 1 day staff development program focusing on mastery learning instructional strategies. Teacher efficacy and self-concept were related to teacher attitudes toward implementation and importance of recommended practices. Based on the study, teachers who were the most self-efficacious were more receptive to the implementation of new instructional strategies, while less effective teachers were less receptive to innovative change. Guskey (1988) noted the importance of administrative support in the implementation of new strategies to ease potential anxiety felt by teachers. Guidance and pressure must be coupled with support and assistance so teachers can increase their skill, ownership, and stable use of innovative practices.

A teacher's self-efficacy beliefs also designate their abilities to bring about positive change. Applying Bandura's (1977) theory of construct efficacy, outcome expectancy would indicate the level to which teachers feel that the learning environment could be controlled or the level at which students could be taught. Teacher self-efficacy

beliefs reflect their ability to bring about positive change in student learning outcomes (Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

In an educational setting, teaching efficacy can be defined as the perceived degree of effectiveness of instruction on learning. Teachers who develop high levels of teaching efficacy promote a classroom environment that supports higher levels of student learning. Providing opportunities for teachers to play an active role in the change process during the initial stages of change can increase their willingness to participate during transition phases. As Weasmer and Woods (1998) pointed out, “Maintaining a positive personal teaching efficacy is instrumental in accommodating change. Thus, it is vital that innovators acknowledge a teacher's personal teaching efficacy as a powerful influence in altering classroom practice” (p. 245).

### **Measuring Teacher Efficacy**

The early attempts to measure teacher efficacy originated from a simple measure from the Rand survey based on Rotter’s locus of control as a theoretical basis. The Rand research looked at teacher efficacy as the extent teachers could control the reinforcement of their actions. The Rand study delved into the question of whether teachers feel as if external factors overwhelm their ability to impact student learning versus those who feel they have the ability to impact student learning regardless of environmental factors (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

The Rand measure focused on two primary questions. The first question in the study was, “When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can’t do much because most of a student’s motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment.” Teachers who agreed with this statement tend to view factors such as education at home or conflicting issues that arise within the home or community are beyond their control.

Question 2 in the study was, “If I really try hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students.” Teachers who agreed with this statement feel as though they can impact the lives of their students regardless of external factors. As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) went on to point out,

Teachers’ sense of efficacy had a strong positive link not only to student performance but to the percent of project goals achieved, to the amount of teacher change, and to the continued use of project methods and materials after the project ended. (p. 785)

After the Rand studies, an efficacy scale was developed by Guskey (1981) to assess teacher beliefs to measure their responsibility for the academic performance of their students. Guskey’s (1981) Responsibility for Student Achievement (RSA) also attempted to measure teacher beliefs relative to internal versus external control; however, the RSA targeted the assessment of teacher beliefs in their responsibility solely in academic achievement and school-related situations (Guskey, 1981). Guskey (1981) proposed that certain dynamics may exist in taking credit for positive things that occurred in the classroom versus those that were operative in accepting blame for certain failures. Therefore, the RSA was developed to include subscales to assess internal responsibility for classroom successes (R+ score) and classroom failures (R- score).

Gibson and Dembo (1984) developed a 30-item Teacher Efficacy Scale as a way to measure the relationship between teacher efficacy and observable behaviors. Gibson and Dembo called for a need to investigate efficacy from a multidimensional approach, breaking the concept down into two separate dimensions identified as general teaching efficacy and personal teaching efficacy. Personal teaching efficacy referred to the belief that one has the skills and abilities to bring about student learning. General teaching

efficacy was identified as the belief that teachers have the ability to bring about change even in the face of external factors. Based on the work of Gibson and Dembo, further identifications were made that teachers who exhibit a strong belief in their level to influence change in student learning and have confidence in their teaching abilities have a higher level of efficacy than teachers who have lower expectations concerning their abilities. Further identifications were also able to be made regarding observable factors and teaching efficacy. These included classroom behaviors related to feedback patterns between teachers and students, the academic focus established in classrooms, and groupings of students.

### **Collective Efficacy**

Collective self-efficacy beliefs refer to the judgment of teachers within a building to be able to come together and execute a course of action to positively impact students (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). Following the work of Bandura (1977), Goddard et al. (2000) conducted a study investigating the relationships between the collective efficacy of teaching staffs and the academic performance of their students. After initial field tests and pilot studies were done to assess validity, a study was conducted involving groups of elementary schools within a large urban Midwestern school district. The study involved 47 randomly selected schools and a total of 452 teachers who completed surveys focusing on collective efficacy within the individual schools. Data were also collected regarding student performance and achievement levels in reading and math. Math and reading were utilized as dependent variables for the study in order to look at efficacy perceptions and linkages to student achievement. Results from the study were consistent with predictions regarding the positive correlation between collective efficacy and student achievement. In addition, the collective teacher

efficacy had a stronger association on student success than student socioeconomic status.

Group competence and the analysis of the tasks to be completed are highly related to the collective efficacy of teachers within the school. In analyzing the results, the researchers noted the reciprocal relationship between the collective efficacy of a group and the level of effort and persistence teachers bring with them and their teaching practices. These results are of particular interest to building-level leaders when assessing how to raise the collective efficacy of their staffs. Goddard et al. (2000) identified that providing teachers with opportunities for mastery experiences related to effectively designed staff development and research projects supports the goal of increased collective efficacy. The researchers also identified the benefit of providing vicarious experiences through trips to model schools and videos as a means of providing additional support in building the group efficacy of their staffs.

### **Teacher Efficacy and Change**

The self-efficacy beliefs of teachers have a direct relationship to the effort teachers invest in teaching, the establishment of goals, their willingness to persist when things do not go smoothly, and their resilience in the face of setbacks (Tschannen-Moran & McMasters, 2009). Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are better equipped to test and implement new instructional practices (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomie, 2002). Teacher sense of competency and self-efficacy is a centerpiece of educational reform efforts. Building teacher self-efficacy is predicated on teacher beliefs that their behaviors can impact the education of their students. Teachers must feel competent that they can perform their job and assured that they will receive the necessary support from the system (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002).

In looking at the impact of professional development on teacher efficacy, Ross

(1994) investigated three sources of information related to Bandura's (1977) theory of efficacy including the opportunities individuals practice, vicarious experience, and verbal persuasion. The study probed into whether experienced teachers would become more confident about their ability to meet student needs over the course of the in-service training, determine whether experienced teachers would become more confident about the ability of schools to teach all children regardless of their ability or background, and determine if there would be changes in teacher efficacy as it related to student outcomes.

Throughout the course of the 8-month study, teacher efficacy was measured on three different occasions related to teacher ability to skillfully incorporate cooperative learning strategies. Teachers comprised from four separate districts from Grades 7, 8, and 9 across multiple content areas were selected for the study. Teacher efficacy was measured utilizing a 16-item instrument adopted from Gibson and Dembo (1984) on three different occasions throughout the year. Three instruments were utilized for the study including a self-appraisal form, interviews and self-administered surveys, and qualitative data were also accumulated through field notes that were taken at different site meetings from the professional development.

Results from Ross's (1994) study showed that the staff development that was provided was not strong enough to bring about needed change in the instructional practices related to cooperative learning. Ross pointed to the lack of in-session opportunities for practice with the new teaching skills and the relatively short duration of the in-service training as contributing factors toward the lack of success. The weaknesses of the in-service training also deprived participants of both personal performance feedback and persuasive opportunities from colleagues. The study pointed to the need for teachers to experience successful implementation of specific skills as well as supportive

feedback in order to increase teacher efficacy.

Tschannen-Moran and McMasters (2009) noted that it is important for scholars and school leaders to pay attention to teacher self-efficacy because of the function that it plays in implementing new strategies in professional development. The researchers looked into the role that format of professional development plays in developing teacher self-efficacy when incorporating a new strategy to the classroom. Four different professional development designs were selected for the study. These were based on Bandura's (1977) different sources of self-efficacy beliefs including verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, mastery experiences, and physiological states. Participants in the study were taken from nine schools from five different school districts that were placed into four separate treatment groups. The study investigated the implementation of a new reading program within the various schools.

The four different treatment groups received different levels of support throughout the different training sessions. Treatment Group 1 received a 3-hour, lecture-style workshop using strictly verbal persuasion and information dissemination as the source for self-efficacy beliefs. The opportunity to learn through vicarious experience and modeling was added to the informational session for Group 2. In this workshop, the presenter allowed for 20 minutes to demonstrate the reading strategies with struggling readers. Treatment Group 3 received the opportunity for mastery experiences in addition to the sources that were provided to the previous groups. These teachers were allowed the opportunities to practice the new skills themselves during practice sessions held during the workshop. The final treatment group received all of Bandura's (1977) sources of self-efficacy. These teachers received the 30-minute informational sessions and modeling opportunities as well as sessions to practice the new skills and coaching

(Tschannen-Moran & McMasters, 2009).

Results from a quasi-experimental quantitative study done by Tschannen-Moran and McMasters (2009) showed that a professional development reinforcing mastery experiences coupled with follow-up coaching had the most powerful impact on teacher self-efficacy beliefs with regard to implementation of a new strategy. The study of implementing a new strategy found that both verbal persuasion and vicarious experience were both minimally effective in leading to change. The study supported the increased need for professional development models that focused on the need for increased feedback and support. In the study, professional development training that allowed for follow-up coaching showed an increase in the effectiveness of implementation (Tschannen-Moran & McMasters, 2009).

### **Summary**

As Guskey (2004) noted, grading is one of the most important responsibilities assigned to teachers; however, most teachers have received little formalized training in different grading practices, leading them to revert back to their experiences as students (Guskey, 2004). In order for a successful change in grading practices to take place, teachers must feel competent and effective in their abilities to carry out such change. While there are a number of justifiable reasons for the usage of standards-based grading, there are fewer studies that investigate specific districts' transitions to standards-based grading and the professional development that accompanies the change. The aim of this study was to review effective practices and staff development offerings that have been utilized to increase teacher efficacy in utilizing standards-based grading.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers on the impact of professional development on teacher efficacy during the implementation of the standards-based grading. This study took place in a rural school district in North Carolina that has shifted to the form of standards-based grading. The transition to standards-based grading has been gradual and used by a limited number of districts in the state at this time. Due to the incremental transition of standards-based grading to future grade levels, findings from the study seek to provide information to the district about how to further improve the training to meet the needs of teachers and staff. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology, data collection, analysis of the data, and procedures that were utilized throughout the process of the study.

### **Restatement of the Problem**

Marzano (2000) noted there are three problem areas around classroom grading practices. Teachers consider factors other than academic achievement, weigh assessments differently, and misinterpret single classroom scores on assessments (Marzano, 2000). In order to provide teachers with the ability to overcome these problems, high-quality professional development is imperative to support them as they learn to utilize standards-based grading effectively. As Paeplow (2011) pointed out in research done on the implementation of the standards-based report card in the Wake County School System, consistency among teachers is critical in implementation. Paeplow noted,

While school systems that have implemented a standards-based report card detailing student progress have found mixed results, current research is sparse.

Standards-based grading with a focus on student mastery is posited as a less subjective and therefore more equitable and accurate grading practice. However, to realize its potential as an equitable grading system, standards-based grading must be implemented with fidelity. (p. 11)

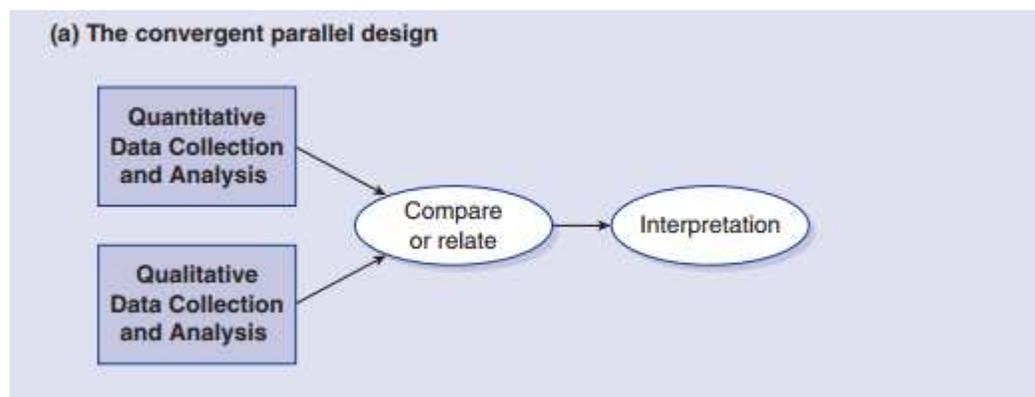
### **Methodology and Research Design**

The philosophical underpinnings for this study took a pragmatic worldview. Creswell (2014) pointed to the different justifications that pragmatism provides for a basis for studies. Researchers within mixed-methods study draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative beliefs during the research process. There is also a freedom of choice in the methods, techniques, and procedures that best suit the researcher's needs and purposes. The pragmatic worldview also allows the researcher the ability to look at the "what" and "how" to research based on intended consequences. The mixed-methods research provides a purpose or rationale for the mixing of data from both quantitative and qualitative sources (Creswell, 2014).

Within the mixed-methods approach, the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, or language into a single study. The goal is not to replace the qualitative or quantitative approach but to draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both within a single study. The mixed-methods approach does not restrict the researcher's choices but allows for the use of multiple approaches to answer research questions. By combining qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher can also construct more comprehensive knowledge in order to inform future theory and practice. This can also lead to an increase in the generalizability of the research findings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The research employed a convergent parallel design as demonstrated in Figure 4.

Within this approach, the researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data, analyzed them independently, and then compared the results to see if the findings confirm or disconfirm one another (Creswell, 2014).



Source: Creswell (2014).

*Figure 4.* Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design.

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The data provided through both the qualitative and quantitative sources allowed for a comparison through which interpretations may be made through the triangulation of different data sources.

Mirriam (1995) pointed out that qualitative research is ideal for finding creative approaches to looking at familiar problems as well as building on theory or generalizations. The purpose for this study was intended to gain the perspectives from multiple sources. Qualitative research contains a number of characteristics that differentiate it from other methods of inquiry. Qualitative research takes place within the natural settings of the participants and allows for an investigation into their everyday lives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). The researcher was able to collect data where participants were experiencing the problem being studied. The qualitative approach also allows the researcher to gain data on the perceptions of the participants through a deep

attentiveness and empathetic understanding. In addition, a large portion of the analysis is done through words that can be clustered, allowing the researcher to analyze and construct different patterns (Miles et al., 2013).

The qualitative component in the study allowed for an in-depth analysis of teacher perceptions regarding the professional development that was offered and how it allowed them to gain a better understanding of how to implement standards-based grading in their classrooms. The qualitative piece also allowed data to be collected at the site of the participants where the issue is experienced. The qualitative research process also seeks to allow for multiple perspectives of the participants to be shared as well as identifying the various components that are involved in the transition. Throughout the interview process, data were collected in order to build on emergent themes that began to develop once this process was completed.

Creswell (2014) pointed out that the researcher must maintain a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold to the problem or issue in the research. The qualitative data taken from the research were utilized to provide a picture of the implementation of standards-based grading in the district through the lens of teachers in the district. These qualitative data were gathered through focus groups conducted in the spring semester after teachers in the district went through the staff development activities during the previous school year. The study was conducted in an effort to determine the strength the professional development had in building teacher efficacy to implement standards-based grading practices. In the study, the different perspectives of teachers, building-level administrators, and district officials were investigated to gain insight into their different perceptions about the creation and utilization of the professional development to support teacher growth in using standards-based grading. Through the

study, the goal was to determine the usefulness the staff development offerings had in increasing teacher efficacy in the implementation of standards-based grading.

### **Program Evaluation**

Program evaluation began to experience extensive usage in the middle of the 1960s after attempts were made to begin systematically assessing programs. The purpose of the program evaluation is to supply decision makers with information regarding existing or proposed educational programs. Program evaluation can be used for multiple sources such as developing a program through a needs assessment, development of a program through formative evaluation, or through a summative evaluation of a program after implementation (Ball, 2011). Weir (1980) identified,

Evaluation in education has two basic responsibilities: it must pass judgment as to the quality or effectiveness of an educational practice, and it must make recommendations as to whether, and in what way, the practice should be adopted, maintained, or improved. (p. 1)

Slavin (2008) also noted the importance of looking at the procedures conducted in program evaluation, pointing out that program evaluation synthesis has high stakes attached. The education of millions of children can hinge on the synthesis of the evaluation and ensuring that the processes by which they are arrived at are open, consistent, impartial, and in accordance with both science and common sense (Slavin, 2008).

The design of the study was based on the goal of gathering data from multiple stakeholders involved in the implementation of standards-based grading. A focus was placed on the perceptions of the teachers who were going through the professional development stages; however, in evaluating the district's program of staff development, it

was useful to gain insight from both district- and school-level leadership. In addition to gaining teacher perceptions of the staff development offerings, a focus group consisting of three of the district principals was conducted to gain building-level administrator input as to the challenges their teachers face on a consistent basis. These individuals work with the teachers on a daily basis; therefore, gaining their insight added to the depth and scope of the research. Finally, a one-on-one interview was conducted with the district's elementary school director of curriculum and instruction. This individual has been responsible for the development and materials involved with the training sessions for the district.

### **Model and Theory of Staff Development**

The training model was utilized as a framework for the study because the district has utilized this form of delivery during the staff evaluation process for the district.

There are several assumptions that support the training model for staff development. The first assumption is that the skill development or training is worthy of replication.

Another key assumption focuses on the ability of teachers to change their behaviors to produce new ones that were previously not in their range of teaching skills. In addition, the training model may be the most cost-efficient method for skill acquisition due to the high participant-to-trainer ratio (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989).

In their research into staff development, Showers, Joyce, and Bennett (1987) pointed to the importance of program design in accomplishing the goals of teachers taking back useful strategies to their classrooms. In their research, the combinations of exploration of theory, demonstration of modeling of a skill, practices of the skill under simulated conditions, feedback about performance, and coaching in the workplace are needed if the outcome of skill development is to be accomplished (Showers et al., 1987).

Joyce and Showers (1980) noted that a large part of school and district officials utilizing the training model focus on the theory related to the staff development; however, to be most effective, there is a need to include demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application (Joyce & Showers, 1980). In looking at the training model established by Joyce and Showers, Bush's (1984) 5-year longitudinal study of training in California pointed to an important need for coaching within the model. In the study, after participants had received training on the description of the new skill, modeling or demonstrations, additional practice, and feedback, 16-19 of the individuals demonstrated the ability to perform; however, after the fifth component of coaching and assistance in the classroom was added, 95% of the participants were able to transfer the skill into practice (Bush, 1984).

Showers et al. (1987) also noted the importance of individual variables that must be understood to overcome problems in staff development. These variables include an understanding of people and how they respond differently to training. Staff developers must also look at the social context and its impact on the people within the organization or school. The different training components must also be taken into account and how these contribute to the development of knowledge, skill, and transfer into the school setting. Finally, the degrees of implementation must be assessed to see how they impact learning in the personal, social, and academic areas.

### **Research Site**

In the state of North Carolina, there are currently 115 different school districts. The study took place in a rural school district located outside of Raleigh. The district is currently the seventh largest district and the second fastest growing district in the state. The district currently serves over 35,000 students and is the seventh largest district in the

state of North Carolina. Of the district's 46 schools, 23 schools currently serve elementary school students. The shift to standards-based grading in the district occurred 2 years previous to the study. The district has identified that the standards-based grading format allows for communication of student progress throughout the year in meeting end-of-year expectations. Teachers assess student performance on learning standards which are specific and observable grade-level skills defined in the K-2 elementary curriculum. The district report card separates student academic performance from evaluations of student behavior and work habits.

The implementation of standards-based grading was introduced by the district, and the expectation was that teachers would become familiar with this form of grading. As standards-based grading had been utilized by teachers in previous grade levels, both students and parents were familiar with this form of grading. This would seemingly allow for a smoother transition for these two groups of stakeholders. The school board decided to phase out traditional grading as students progressed so that the following year, the fourth-grade teachers would begin utilizing standards-based grading. Obtaining access to these teachers required district-level permission from the superintendent and district-level administration. The district will be able to utilize the data as it prepares the staff for future integration that will be necessary for grade-level implementation in an effort to improve staff training and teacher efficacy in utilizing standards-based grading.

### **Participants**

In order to conduct the evaluation to address the research questions, a district was needed that was at the fourth-grade stage of the implementation process. As opposed to whole stage implementation for the entire elementary grade levels K-5, the district progressed at a slower pace in order to provide focused staff development for specific

grade levels. As students progressed through their elementary school years, the standards-based grading system followed with them. The focus was to enable teachers, students, and parents to gain familiarity with the standards-based form of grading. It would also allow for the district to target smaller groups of teachers to provide more focused staff development with a smaller population of teachers. At this stage, the district has moved to the fourth-grade level. In the 3 years prior to the implementation at the fourth-grade level, the standards-based form of grading was incorporated at the K-3 grade levels. The curriculum and instruction department in the system has worked to develop a grading rubric and incorporated staff training for teachers in the K-2 grade levels. Students and parents who will be matriculating into the fourth-grade level are familiar with this form of grading.

Data taken from the study were collected from volunteers who are representative of the following groups: fourth-grade teachers within the district who participated in the professional development, elementary principals, and the director of elementary curriculum and instruction for the district. In order to gain a better picture of the effectiveness of the staff training, it was imperative to collect data from various stakeholders within the district. Collection of data took the form of two separate focus groups consisting of four teachers in each session. In order to gain additional input, an interview was also conducted with a teacher from the district. Focus group and interview questions were prepared in advance and allowed for potential themes to emerge based on the responses. The guide also allowed the facilitator an opportunity to probe or follow up on specific issues that arose during the session.

The study took a quasi-experimental approach and a purposeful sample of nine teacher volunteers were selected to participate in the focus group and interview sessions.

The sample of teachers from the district looked to be representative of the experience level, gender, and ethnicity of the fourth-grade teachers as a whole. There are currently 23 elementary schools in the district; therefore, willingness of teachers to participate could have impacted the availability of participants.

An interview was set up with the elementary director of curriculum and instruction. This individual played an active role in the creation of the professional development activities outlined in the district's implementation process. She helped develop and plan the training session conducted in the spring semester of 2017 that was attended by all of the district's fourth-grade teachers. In addition, she has also worked to plan training sessions that are dedicated to the specific needs of the individual schools within the district. This includes site-based training sessions for grade-level teachers that are specific to their individual needs. As the district progresses with the implementation of standards-based grading, she is also working to develop future goals and strategies to overcome obstacles or concerns related to current district practices in standards-based grading.

A focus group interview consisting of three district principals was also conducted to gain insight into the building-level leadership and their experiences with teachers within the building. These individuals have a more in-depth understanding about the successes and challenges teachers still face within their buildings. These individuals have firsthand knowledge of the experiences of their teachers and the obstacles they face on a more consistent basis within their own buildings. Questions focused on the relative strengths regarding teacher experiences with the staff training.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data were gathered through focus group and interview questions that

were developed to address the research questions. Teachers in the researcher's school were utilized to gather data and validate the survey questions. These teachers were representative of the whole group of interviewees who were interviewed later in the study. These participant responses are not included in the actual research results but were used as a means of determining whether the responses are valid and reliable. Questions were provided by the school's teacher learning coach, so teachers would feel more comfortable responding openly and candidly and the bias of the researcher would not impact the results from the field test of questions. Questions utilized for the focus group and interview sessions can be found in Appendix A.

Questions focused on particular things that came to the minds of the participants as they went through the training sessions and determined whether their reactions to the training were primarily positive or negative. While the participants reflected on their experiences, the researcher looked to determine what areas of the professional development truly assisted them in their understanding of standards-based grading. Participants had an opportunity to reflect on how the professional development has altered their thinking about the different means of formative assessment as it relates to the grading process in order to give a more accurate picture of student learning. In addition, the interview process looked to allow for particular concerns of barriers that still existed after they completed the professional development.

After an initial introduction, the researcher provided the participants with an overview of the study. After this initial review, the researcher looked to provide information regarding the study and how it will be utilized to support the growth of the system. By providing this information, the researcher looked to increase participant willingness to see the interview as a potential resource for change and improvement.

Introductory questions during the interviews focused primarily on surface-level questions. This also allowed the interviewees an opportunity to become comfortable with the interview itself. Interview questions then honed in on more in-depth questions that sought to provide the researcher with information regarding participant attitudes and beliefs regarding their experiences with the professional development opportunities. The final portion of the interview process will shape future considerations regarding ways to support teachers in the implementation of standards-based grading in the future.

### **Quantitative Data**

Quantitative survey data were gathered from teachers who participated in the district's professional development session in the spring of the 2016-2017 school year and the site based professional development during the 2017-2018 school year. The researcher utilized an online survey to gather the quantitative data from teachers after they participated in the professional development offerings from the district. Only fourth-grade teachers who participated in the staff training in the spring of 2016-2017 and sessions in the 2017-2018 school year were used. Teacher responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). The survey was broken down into three sections to address the research questions regarding teacher support, formative assessment utilization, and factors impacting teacher understanding. Questions utilized in the survey can be found in Appendix B.

### **Procedures**

The proposal was sent to the Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University for approval. Consent was also sought from the superintendent of school system, and requests were made to participating teachers within the district. The request letter can be found in Appendix C. It was explained that the interviews were voluntary.

The goal was to provide teachers the opportunity to share their opinions without fear of identification.

Focus groups and the interview session comprised of the nine teachers from the district were conducted in the classroom setting to allow for the comfort of participant natural surroundings. The interview with the district's director of elementary education was conducted at the central office for the district. The focus group of district principals occurred at a centralized location in one of the district's schools. Audio taped interviews were utilized to gather responses from the participants in the study and were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. The researcher also took notes from the focus group sessions and interview in case equipment failed and information was unable to be retrieved. Once the transcription took place, the researcher began to look for emergent themes that began to develop regarding teacher, administrator, and district leadership perceptions regarding the usefulness of the training sessions. These interviews were conducted during the spring semester of the 2017-2018 school year. Participants had the opportunity to receive a transcribed copy of the notes from the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data were gathered through the focus groups conducted with teachers who were purposefully selected from the group of fourth-grade teachers who participated in the staff development opportunities during the 2017-2018 school year. Interviews were conducted at the sites where the teachers currently teach. Data collection procedures involved face-to-face individual interviews and included open-ended questions that were geared toward gaining the views and opinions of the individual teachers. At the time of the research, the participants were moving toward completion of the first year of standards-based grading implementation. The qualitative software

program NVivo was utilized to sort and organize the data accumulated from the interviews that were conducted. Audio files from the interviews were transcribed and uploaded into the program to disaggregate the data and identify themes.

Quantitative surveys provided to all fourth-grade teachers were distributed via Google Survey in an effort to collect and assemble responses. The teacher survey results were analyzed using the SPSS software in order to identify the standard deviations and frequency distributions for the different survey responses. The survey was given to teachers within the researcher's school as a means of validating the instrument.

### **Validity and Reliability**

In mixed-method studies, the combination of both qualitative and quantitative data allows for more increased validity and complete answers to the research questions. The mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive assessment of the problem through the integration of multiple quantitative and qualitative sources. Mixed-methods research also enriches the credibility and validity of the study which is scientifically designed and tested. This approach also allows for a more rigorous evaluation of the program implementation and for better transferability of the results to other contexts and settings outside of the research location (Ivankova, 2015). The strategies incorporated for the research study included the triangulation of data sources, the use of thick and rich description from the data to convey the findings, and clarifying the researcher's bias leading into the study.

### **Triangulation of Data Sources**

The researcher triangulated data taken from the results from the quantitative survey questions given to all fourth-grade teachers and the qualitative focus group and interview results. This allowed the researcher to take into account multiple perspectives

of different individuals in the staff development program for the district. The researcher looked for emerging themes resulting from the responses from the different groups of participants. Combining both the statistical data taken from surveys and the thick, rich data from the qualitative component of the mixed-methods design allowed for a deeper understanding of teacher experiences as they have progressed through the staff development process.

### **Data Usage**

The research provided multiple perspectives from the different stakeholders within the organization. As Creswell (2014) noted, the use of detailed description can aid in transporting the reader into the natural setting of the participants. The use of vivid detail within the research aids the reader in viewing the account as credible. This also allows readers to make informed decisions about how applicable the findings are across different settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### **Researcher Bias**

The number of studies of most practical programs is normally very small, hence the need to be strict on issues such as researcher bias when looking at procedures in program evaluation (Slavin, 2008). The researcher is currently a principal in the district where the staff development is occurring. The researcher has served as a building-level administrator in the district for 6 years. Previous to serving as a school administrator, the researcher was a high school English teacher. During the course of district-level implementation, the researcher had numerous conversations with other leaders during principal meetings regarding the benefits of standards-based grading. The researcher also had dialogue within numerous professional learning community meetings regarding the usage in the district. The researcher is a proponent of the change to the standards-based

approach and feels that it provides a more accurate portrayal of student learning. While bringing these thoughts and opinions into the study, the researcher worked to focus on the results from the study, recognizing that honest feedback can lead to a stronger professional development program to support future grade levels and teachers within the district.

### **A Summary Statement of the Methodology**

In concluding research in the Bay District, McMunn et al. (2003) pointed to the need for further research on how to structure professional development opportunities. This includes the ability to support teacher literacy in assessment practices in standards-based reporting (McMunn et al., 2003). As trends move toward alternative methods of assessing student learning, the study will provide information to systems that attempt to implement standards-based grading in the future. The results from the program evaluation can potentially be utilized by the district moving forward in attempting to strengthen the delivery for teachers and staff in the future. The implementation of standards-based grading will be utilized by fifth-grade teachers during the 2018-2019 school year. This will require further understanding of the strengths and areas for growth of the existing professional development model that is currently in place.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of standards-based grading in fourth grade in a rural district in North Carolina. The study's main focus was on the professional development provided through the district and the impact this has had on the implementation process. Guhn (2009) pointed out that research in the field of education is imperative due to the large number of districts that are adopting new standards-based grading practices. Guhn further pointed out that in order for these initiatives to have success, it is important to understand how teachers develop in their understanding throughout the development process.

This chapter further analyzes the three research questions and addresses each one based on both the qualitative and quantitative data that were collected. The first research question focused on the different types of support that are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach. The second question looked at how the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning. The third question sought to identify what factors have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading.

Participants for both the interview and focus groups from the district included nine teachers, three elementary principals, and the director of elementary curriculum and instruction. Interviews were conducted during the spring semester of the 2017-2018 school year after teachers had the opportunity to go through the training sessions and had an opportunity to implement standards-based grading in their classrooms. The teacher focus groups were broken down into two separate sessions with four teachers from the

district attending each session and one separate interview with one fourth-grade teacher. These sessions were conducted at a centrally located school in the district. The principal focus group took place in the conference room of one of the district principal's schools. The interview session with the director took place in her office at the district central office location. All interviews and focus group sessions were audio taped and transcribed to allow for the researcher to go back and analyze participant responses. Chapter 4 provides the themes that arose from decoding the data from these three separate groups.

### **Study Participants**

There were fewer study participants in the teacher and principal groups than in the proposal. This arose as a result of fewer participants that were willing to participate in the study after reaching out to these individual groups; however, based on the results from the different groups, the researcher was able to collect sufficient data to support overall themes that arose within these study groupings. The following participants were initially scheduled to participate in the study: director for curriculum and instruction for the district, 15 elementary school teachers, and five principals. Actual participants for the study consisted of the following: director for curriculum and instruction for the district, nine elementary school teachers, and three principals.

Quantitative data were collected from a teacher survey that was distributed to all fourth-grade teachers in the district. A Google Survey was used to collect responses from participants in order to compare the results with the interview and focus group data in an effort to determine what similarities and differences existed between the two sources.

### **Explanation of the District's Shift to Standards-Based Grading**

Standards-based grading was piloted in the school system during the 2013-2014 school year in prekindergarten through second grade. This was a departure from the

traditional form of grading that had been utilized in the past. The shift has continued into the upper grades of the elementary level leading into the fourth grade in the 2017-2018 school year. The document unpacks the North Carolina state standards for English/language arts, math, science, and social studies. The standards themselves are broken down into individual strands that are assessed on a four-point rubric. The students receive their report cards quarterly. The rubric can be lengthy, ranging at times up to 14 pages.

The district provided a description of standards-based grading by pointing out, Standards-based grading uses academic performance indicators that are observable and objective to communicate student progress throughout the year in meeting grade level standards. Teachers assess student performance on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study which are specific and observable grade level skills. Mastery of these standards ensure readiness and success in the next grade level. The district uses the following indicators: M (mastery), P (progressing toward mastery), B (beginning to progress toward mastery) or N (not yet demonstrating progress). (Retrieved from District website)

The district provided further definitions of the learning progression and indicators.

- **M** - Indicates that the student consistently and independently demonstrates mastery of the grade level standard. Students who receive “M” are completing the expected learning at end of year grade level standard. Mastery indicates that the student has reached a level of performance expected of grade level students for that standard with consistency, accuracy, independence, and quality. Instruction will: focus on more complex problems, offer more levels of challenge for the learner in application, and provide more in-depth and

critical thinking in the area of that standard.

- **P** - Indicates that the student is progressing toward consistent and independent mastery of the grade level standard. Students who are progressing toward the standard are demonstrating a level of understanding that is typically/ appropriately expected during the course of the academic year.
- **B** - Indicates that the student is beginning to progress toward the grade level standard. Students who are beginning to progress toward a standard may require additional support, monitoring, and/or assistance for clarification in order to assist in progress and support.
- **N** - Indicates that the student is not yet demonstrating progress toward the grade level standard. Students who receive “N” are still acquiring prerequisite skills in order to understand the content of the grade level standard. Students need additional assistance, increased time, smaller chunks of learning, and/or alternate strategies for gaining foundational standards that will lead to the grade level standards. (Retrieved from District Standards-Based Grading Document, July 6, 2018)

In identifying what this shift meant for teachers, the district noted,

Teachers assess student performance based on specific and observable grade level skills (priority standards). Assessments on standards can be revisited to ensure progress towards mastery. These priority standards are the basis for curriculum, instruction, and assessment and are based on students’ individual achievement.

This process provides teachers the opportunity to communicate to students about how well and in what ways proficiency on the standard was demonstrated, as well

as the specific steps students need to take to increase proficiency. (Retrieved from District website)

### **Professional Development Outline**

The district brought all fourth-grade teachers together during the spring semester before the 2017-2018 school year for a district-wide staff development session. During this session, presenters were contracted to provide the teachers with a 1-day session providing an overview of standards-based grading and implementation for the fourth-grade level. Participants were provided with information on the benefits of standards-based grading and research to support the utilization of this form of grading. While this mandatory session focused more on the overarching themes behind standards-based grading, the district also provided optional sessions during the summer months providing more support on standards-based teaching and learning practices associated with standards-based grading. The district also provided optional professional development opportunities for elementary schools during the course of the year to those who were interested. This was voluntary, and training was provided by district personnel associated with the implementation process. Fourth-grade teachers also had opportunities to work with their individual school's teacher learning coach during their grade-level meetings and professional learning community meetings.

### **Qualitative Research: Emergent Themes**

In order to answer the research questions, interviews were transcribed and common themes were pulled from the data based on responses from the focus group sessions and strengths that were identified in the initial training as well as resources the teachers felt are needed moving forward for the district.

## **Results for Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked, “What different types of support that are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach?”

### **Theme 1: Exploration of Theory and Justification for Standards-Based Grading Shift**

One of the predominant strengths that arose from the focus groups and interviews centered on laying the groundwork and providing the justification for a shift to standards-based grading within the district. The training model researched by Showers et al. (1987) focuses on a myriad of different pieces combined together to form an effective model for professional development. In looking at the training model discussed earlier in the research for professional development, the district appears to have weighed heavily on the exploration of theory when introducing the conceptual basis for standards-based grading. The district’s director of elementary curriculum and instruction noted that sharing the background, research, and rationale for shifting to standards-based grading would be important to provide to the district’s teachers. The director pointed out that early sessions attempted to answer questions such as why the district is moving forward with standards-based grading and what it looks like in other states and across the nation. As the director noted, “training focused really on the why. Like I said, we did not really get into the how, we just focused on what is standards-based grading, and why are we doing it.” The district has also placed heavy emphasis on providing teachers with research supporting the benefits of standards-based grading and the positive impact that the transition could have for the district.

From the district’s leadership perspective, this was an important starting point in

order to provide teachers with a basis and justification for the shift in grading practices.

The director of elementary education for the district pointed out,

Really starting with a “why” and helping teachers understand the research behind it. You know why are we doing this? What does this look like? What other states are doing? How does this look in their states? How does it look across our nation? We start with that, and we started with that in fourth grade.

One of the strengths multiple teachers identified focused on the district’s effort to provide the justification for the shift to standards-based grading. Multiple teachers referenced the presenter’s effort to identify why the transition would be beneficial for the district. In reviewing the data, multiple teachers specifically spoke to the importance of what they described as the “why” behind standards-based grading. One of the teachers noted, “I definitely liked the emphasis on the ‘why’ because I think it’s important to bring it around. I took a lot out of that for what we are looking at for kids.” Another teacher pointed out, “They really honed in on why we are hearing this and how this is affecting the students.”

As noted earlier in the research, one component of transitioning to a new form of grading focuses on having dialogue between teachers and officials regarding their entrenched beliefs and feelings regarding traditional grading practices. The director pointed to the initial feelings of uneasiness that exist among teachers as they transition from the familiarity associated with traditional grading to the newly implemented standards-based grading. She alluded to this while referencing teacher feelings of discomfort and what the district has attempted to do. She stated, “Some are reluctant to change because of discomfort and lack of understanding. We acknowledge that and we understand that because we have experienced that as well in this process.” She

concluded by noting, “That's really helping to provide us insight on paving the way for next steps.”

After the initial training of the spring semester of the previous 2016-2017 school year, the district hosted an optional professional development event entitled *EQUIP* focusing on different areas of curriculum and instruction. One component of the break-out sessions focused on different practical aspects associated with standards-based grading. The director pointed to some of the areas that were focal pieces at the sessions. She noted that the sessions focused on “What does mastery look for in each of the standards?” The obstacle regarding this piece is that the trainings were optional; and while attended by a contingency of fourth-grade teachers, it was not mandatory and experienced by all teachers in the district. The director noted, “It's an ongoing process. And every year we realize what our teachers need, and we try to develop sessions that they can participate in.”

### **Application and Theory Implementation**

While the introductory session was identified as a good starting point, participants then began shifting to what types of support were needed moving forward throughout the remainder of the year. Teachers often circled back to how to put theory into practice and practical ways to apply the standards-based grading reform efforts to their classrooms and grade levels. Similar responses from the participants could be categorized within the different elements of the training model identified earlier in the research. These focused on demonstration or modeling of the skills associated with standards-based grading, receiving feedback about their performance, and having ongoing coaching in the workplace to accomplish the goal of skill development.

## **Theme 2: Modeling of a Skill and Practical Application: Clearly Defined Rubrics and Changing Scoring Practices**

One of the emerging themes related to the professional development efforts centered on the practical application associated with assigning grades. Based on discussions with teachers in the district, they grapple with the meaning associated with each of the levels of mastery of the different standards in the rubric. A consistent response from teachers and participants focused on the shift in scoring practices from a traditional form of grading to standards-based grading. A majority of teachers noted the importance of having a clearly defined rubric they were able to understand. During group sessions, teachers acknowledged the difficulties many of them faced when assigning scores to their students. Teachers identified that they needed a clearer picture of the different levels of student mastery and what justifies the levels along the continuum of mastery, proficiency, beginning, and not demonstrated. Teachers also felt that having the ability to look at student work samples and attempt to develop a clearer picture for the different levels of understanding would be invaluable to their growth in implementing standards-based grading.

One teacher pointed out that while the introductory session provided a small component of the district's rubric, a clearer understanding would support her integration of standards-based grading practices. She pointed out, "They did this a little bit. I think just for me personally and just from hearing from other teachers around me, more really digging into this looks like mastery." Another teacher pointed out, "We really get lost in what it is like whether they mastered it or they didn't master it." Other participants noted that the grade level at their schools collectively made progress in developing and utilizing rubrics. One teacher alluded to this, stating,

One of the things that we moved to towards the end of the year was creating our rubrics and doing our test for math in particular. It involved looking at what standard each of the problems on the test covered.

When looking at the grading rubric, teachers pointed out the importance of providing support and developing consistency across the school and district through professional development efforts. In referring to demonstrations of student work and identifying the level of mastery, one teacher pointed out difficulties she felt could be supported through further professional development efforts. In addition to consistency within her class, she also noted the importance of consistency within her grade level and across schools in the district when students transition to another school:

If I get a student or if I send a student someplace else. Based on my teammates, we may think that child is at a P on the rubric. If they go someplace else two teachers may look at it differently from the way that we looked at it. They may not think the child is at a P or Progressing, maybe they think the student is at a B or beginning to master the skill.

The teacher continued by identifying a solution in noting, "Let's look at the work samples or at the standard. Let's break it down." Another teacher pointed out that teachers could be supported through exemplars of student work that could be analyzed using the rubric to gain practice. This teacher pointed out, "even just giving examples of what Mastery or Progressing looks like. Definitely having something where boxes can be checked off will take out a lot of subjectivity that exists right now."

One of the building-level administrators pointed to professional development that had taken place at the school focused around the rubric piece associated with standards-based grading. These professional development opportunities had taken place during

afternoon sessions with the teachers. She pointed out, “We have worked on the early release days building professional development. The first step for us was to take the learning target, take the standard and build learning targets so that we could see the progression.” After this initial professional development, she recognized some of the difficulties the teachers continued to face in utilizing the rubrics. She elaborated by stating, “Teachers have created their rubrics but they are not operating from a rubric-based standpoint.”

### **Theme 3: Support in Working with Parents and Communication**

Another theme that ran across different stakeholder groups during the qualitative sessions centered on the support teachers need in working with parents in explaining or justifying the grades within the rubric. The parents of fourth-grade students have witnessed the transition of standards-based grading following their students through elementary school. While the standards-based form of grading is not new to the parents, teachers pointed out that parent understanding is still somewhat limited. Teachers, administrators, and district officials acknowledged that there are still barriers or gaps that exist regarding a true understanding of standards-based grading for parents.

When looking at the importance of rubrics in parent discussions, one of the teachers identified the importance of how the rubric also assisted her in having conversations about learning with parents. She pointed out, “I think I would definitely be more comfortable explaining to a parent after going through a year of professional development identifying what Mastery and Progressing looks like.” One of the teachers reinforced the importance of providing a clear description of indicators associated with the district’s grading rubric. She pointed out,

That's the place to start to really make it worthwhile for the county. To get rid of

that subjectivity and to make it authentic and as a teacher, for me to feel confident that I can explain to a parent.

Building-level leaders provided their insight into the support they felt their teachers needed with regard to the ongoing support. One principal noted the obstacles teachers faced in working with parents and providing an explanation of the student's performance. The principal pointed out, "We are challenged with how to effectively communicate how we have landed at the grade with parents and that's bringing some anxiety for our teachers as well."

Another principal noted the ongoing challenges and support teachers need with regard to working with parents and their understanding. The principal pointed out, "We talk about exactly where are you in the P when you sit down across from a parent and you say how we got here." He continued to point out that parents at times have difficulty with this as he stated, "parents default to what they know."

#### **Theme 4: Feedback and Coaching in the Workplace**

Based on the sessions, another key issue for the district is looking for ways to provide timely feedback for teachers regarding their utilization of standards-based grading. The director of elementary curriculum and instruction pointed out, "Teachers want the feedback about how they are doing with this. Is this a standards-based assessment? I'm trying this practice that I'm learning in the same condition of the classroom." One avenue where participants noted this could be achieved would be to work through site-based efforts within their professional learning communities.

#### **Utilization of Professional Learning Communities**

A large number of the respondents referred to the importance or comfort that was gained from working with their colleagues within their grade level and professional

learning community meetings. As referenced earlier, in order for change efforts to be sustained, teachers must have opportunities to work collaboratively to confront roadblocks along the way. The district for this study has placed a high priority on the establishment and continued support of professional learning communities within the schools. These serve as a basis for teachers to support one another through discussions of instructional practices and evaluation of student learning. Another common theme that resounded among the different participants in the study referenced the utilization of the professional learning communities as a means of growth with regard to effectively implementing standards-based grading reform in the district.

One teacher noted the usefulness she found in working with her grade-level peers within their professional learning community meetings. She pointed out that a supportive strategy would be “bringing in the PLC and looking at different work samples and then also creating those performance scales or even being given the performance scales and being able to look at those together with the PLC.” The teacher referenced how this could form the basis for “constant reinforcement” in the district’s professional development efforts. Another teacher recognized the importance of their growth in working with peers:

I think I found more strength in working with the peers around me because we had the assessments to look at and they weren't just assessments that were given to us that were examples. Being able to work with the PLC with the support of administration or teacher learning coach was helpful.

One principal identified that additional support would be strengthened by meeting the teachers at their individual levels of understanding of standards-based grading. By differentiating the professional development, individual teachers would be able to grow

and improve. The principal explained, “I think in order to make it effective and tangible for teachers, we're going to have to bring in a team that can individualize the individual needs of each individual professional learning community meeting.”

Another principal noted the importance of investing financially in this effort to allow for teachers to meet for additional time during their professional learning community meetings. She elaborated, “I feel that the district needs to provide money to schools for substitutes to give some of these teachers once a quarter PLC time and bring them together.” Another principal pointed to the importance of bringing the teachers in collectively to provide a clearer and consistent message about the further implementation of standards-based grading. The principal point out,

Bring them in every once in a while and give them a consistent message. Let them work in professional learning communities across schools and find out how to build together because you can glean information from other people who have an interest in this.

### **Coaching in the Workplace: Utilization of Teacher Learning Coaches**

While reflecting on the existing professional development, there appears to be a more concentrated effort for site-based support through each of the school’s teacher learning coaches. During the 2017-2018 school year, the district allocated each school with a teacher learning coach. This individual was responsible for providing support to teachers in the implementation of a district-wide vision for curriculum and instruction and system goals. One of the underlying goals for the district’s vision was the continuation and growth of standards-based grading. The teacher learning coaches are located at each of the schools with the goal of providing an active role within the building’s professional learning community meetings.

In discussing the teacher learning coaches as a resource in the implementation of standards-based grading, the district's director pointed out,

We want to get more concentrated efforts toward more feedback and coaching in the school with teachers. We do have teaching and learning coaches at every school, and we hope to utilize them more. They just came on board last year.

With that being said, their role has not been defined enough.

Many of the study participants acknowledged that one of the obstacles in utilizing these teacher learning coaches in the schools is their relative unfamiliarity with standards-based grading. Unless coaches came from a district that had previously utilized standards-based grading, these individuals are working to gain a better understanding of it themselves.

### **Results for Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked, "How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?"

As noted in Chapter 2, a shift from traditional forms of grading towards a standards-based report card also involves a shift in the different forms of assessment that are utilized to identify a student's level of mastery. As opposed to more short answer or multiple choice forms of assessments, standards-based grading requires more authentic assessments in order to gauge the level of student understanding. Responses to questions focusing on the second research question varied between the different participants who were interviewed. Most stakeholders, ranging from district officials, building administrators, and teachers, recognized that the professional development accompanying the transition to standards-based grading had impacted both the ways in which students

were assessed and how teachers monitored student learning as they progressed towards mastery.

In a review of the implementation of standards-based grading in previous grade levels beginning with first grade, the district's director of elementary curriculum and instruction recognized that there was a heightened focus on the actual grading template itself during earlier implementation in previous grade levels; however, as this process continued, there was a realization that teachers needed additional support in the instructional and evaluation practices associated with standards-based grading. In looking at the formative evaluation processes, the director pointed out that teachers needed additional support in the connection between formative assessment and standards-based grading. In referring to teacher needs, the director pointed out,

They needed a lot more staff development on actually the teaching and learning and looking at evaluating students work as it relates to specific standards. It also included evaluating their lessons and the tasks that they are actually asking students to do and if it was even relevant to the particular standard.

According to the district director, with regard to formative assessment, there also appears to be a clearer picture of what the district would like teachers to be able to do regarding formative assessment. She pointed out that it starts with "designing lessons and constructing activities because they have to be able to design something that's going to achieve the outcome that they want the students to give them."

While much of the early efforts through the district-wide staff development focused on the larger overall picture of why the shift to standards-based grading was occurring, teachers did note that they have experienced growth through the work with their fellow teachers in their grade-level meetings. Participants noted that the work with

their colleagues in the building aided in their understanding of how to look at student assessment differently. This involved working collaboratively in their professional learning communities to develop assessments and make appropriate adjustments in instruction based on student outcomes. One teacher stated that the work aided her in “drilling down and figuring out where she needed to set remediation.” The teacher went on to reference how formative assessment within standards-based grading had changed her perception of student understanding. She stated,

It has helped us see, or be able to understand our students and their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Before, you would give an assessment and if they made a 60 or 70, you would be like, oh they blew it, they don't understand any of it.

Really you can look at those standards and they may have completely understood one part of it and just not the other part.

Another teacher in a different focus group from the district reinforced the transition in formative assessments that has accompanied the professional development in standards-based grading. She pointed out,

I think also too when you're creating assessments, it makes you think more about the types of questions that you're asking and how do you want this to look. I know I got more information than I did with just multiple choice questions. So it really showed if a kid understood the strategies.

In speaking with other teachers in the district, there are shifts that are occurring as a result of the implementation of standards-based grading. One teacher identified how the shift to standards-based grading allowed her to begin seeing the depth of student understanding of a given standard. The transition to standards-based led her to break down different assessments according to the standards to monitor student comprehension

and ability to reach the different levels of the standards-based grading rubric. This shift also changed some of the means in which she assessed learning. The transitions in assessments began moving from short answer and multiple choice towards more authentic assessments that focused on student depth of understanding. The teacher pointed out, “We took away a lot of multiple choice assessments because all you saw was an answer that could have been a lucky guess. It could have been that they worked it out on paper and circled the right answer.” The teacher pointed out that other teachers began asking more probing questions about their students’ level of understanding. Teachers began asking questions such as,

Did they really master the skills? Can they really explain it, or did they just circle the right answer? I think that was a shift that we saw. We looked a lot at really breaking down that assessment and then looking at the standards. It's not just about the right or wrong. That is a part of it, but it's also finding out where they are right or where they are wrong.

Another teacher noted that the shifts in formative assessment that have accompanied standards-based grading have continued to benefit the students in her class. She stated,

Their work could be correct. That was right because I saw where they were going. In the standards-based, I have to look at that as a whole. I think is better for the child honestly because I understand why they're not getting that question right. I'm more focused on how they're doing it as opposed to the well you did it. I mean you got it wrong. Like I said before, it was just kind of a check and an X. Now it's let me understand what they're doing. It just puts more emphasis on that, which is good for me as a teacher.

District principals also acknowledged the transitions they have witnessed in their schools with regard to the different means of formative assessment that have grown after the implementation of standards-based grading. One principal pointed out, “Standards-based grading has really changed our conversation about how we assess and what we look for when we assess. So it really has pushed us toward more authentic assessment.” He further noted, “We are moving away from the very summative assessments that are very rigid to a much more performance-based, much more demonstration rather than regurgitation.” Building leaders also pointed out that teachers have started exploring different means of formative assessment that are practical and easy to incorporate into their daily assessments. One principal pointed out, “We’ve talked about the power of a checklist. Informal assessments are also very powerful in anecdotal notes and even something as simple as a shifting of our record-keeping practices.”

### **Results for Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked, “What factors have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?”

#### **Teacher Understanding of Standards**

Based on the work done with the various groups in the study, it was apparent that a large factor impacting the success of standards-based grading was teacher knowledge and understanding of the different standards. Building-level leaders acknowledged the importance of teachers being able to work through their standards and develop appropriate lessons and assessments to match them. In pointing this out, one principal noted the intense amount of time that went into the discussions and focus on the standards. She pointed out,

We started at the beginning really looking at the standards. But it has taken us to

about January to start trying to build units that are in total alignment with the standards. They're still certainly not perfected by any means, but it took us that long to just get the teachers where they are able to have the conversations to start talking about how to do that and how to address that.

Another principal echoed the difficulty teachers are facing: "They are trying to understand the depth of their standards, the complexity and the rigor in order to build assessments and then activities that they would match their standards. I do think that is challenging and is comprehensive." Another school leader noted that within their school, "it's taken this long for our fourth-grade team to identify learning targets and really craft their units to meet standards and even wrapping their heads around the standards."

Teacher knowledge base and understanding of their different standards were key points brought up during the interview session with the district's director of elementary curriculum and instruction. In reflecting back to previous standards-based grading implementation in the district, the director of elementary curriculum and instruction brought up a realization that was made as standards-based grading was rolled out in earlier grade levels. She noted,

We realized that a lot of our activities didn't really align with specific standards.

And so teachers were having a really "aha" moment about that and also just about their knowledge and their understanding of their own standards and the depth of knowledge that's needed to just say a student has mastered that standard.

She also pointed out,

I think it goes back to really teachers who are really strong in their content and they really are strong in being able to recognize students work and analyze students work in relation to that. What they are expecting. They seem to have a

better grasp at this and others who don't have that heart first seemed to struggle more so that's kind of where we are.

Teachers also pointed out that an individual teacher's knowledge of their standards was a key component of being able to understand and implement standards-based grading in the classroom. One teacher noted,

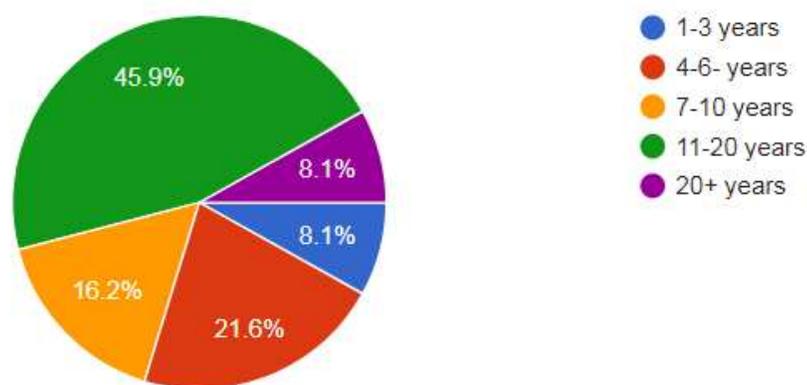
You have to get to a point where you feel very confident with your standards and what your child is able to do when they come in, how they are progressing and where you want them to end up. I think before it rolls out to a grade level you almost need to do standards-based teaching practices the year before and then implement standards-based grading practices. Because when you are trying to grade based on standards, not teaching practices, it's a lot harder to have to switch your mindset.

### **Quantitative Survey Results**

The purpose of the quantitative portion of the research was to examine teacher perception of the district's professional development efforts to support the implementation of standards-based grading. A survey was developed to address the three research questions focusing on the district-level support teachers felt was needed in the transition, the impact the professional development has had on their assessment practices, and a look into the factors that have the largest impact on their ability to understand and implement standards-based grading. The survey was administered to all fourth-grade teachers in the district during the spring semester of 2018. Teachers were asked to respond to questions using a series of 24 questions related to professional development and standards-based grading. Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert scale using the choices 4 – strongly agree, 3 – agree, 2 – disagree, and 1 – strongly disagree. The initial

survey was sent to district principals to forward to all fourth-grade teachers in their building. After initial response rates were low, the researcher then reached out to principals in the district to gather email addresses for the different teachers. Follow-up emails were sent to teachers at the conclusion of the school year and again during the summer break. A total of 107 fourth-grade teachers were sent emails resulting in 38 teachers responding at a rate of 34.5%.

Initial questions in the survey focused on the number of years teachers have been employed, as illustrated in Figure 5. Based on the responses, the largest number of teachers who responded to the survey have been in the classroom for 11-20 years. This was followed by teachers with 4-6 years of experience. The third largest response rate came from teachers who have been teaching for 7-10 years.



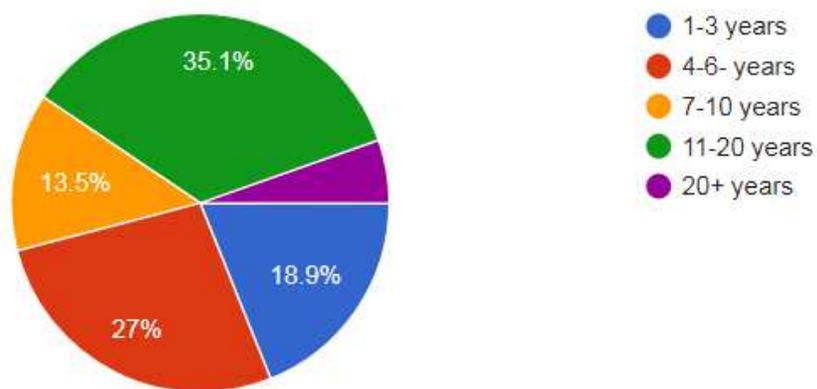
*Figure 5.* Teacher Experience in the Profession.

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The second question focused on how many of the teachers actually taught in the school system participating in the study. The response rates for this question mirrored the first with the largest group of participants teaching in the district for 11-20 years. This was followed by the second group having taught for 4-6 years. The third largest

group was comprised of teachers who have been teaching in the district for 7-10 years.

This is further detailed in Figure 6.



*Figure 6.* Teacher Experience in the District.

### **Quantitative Results for Research Question 1**

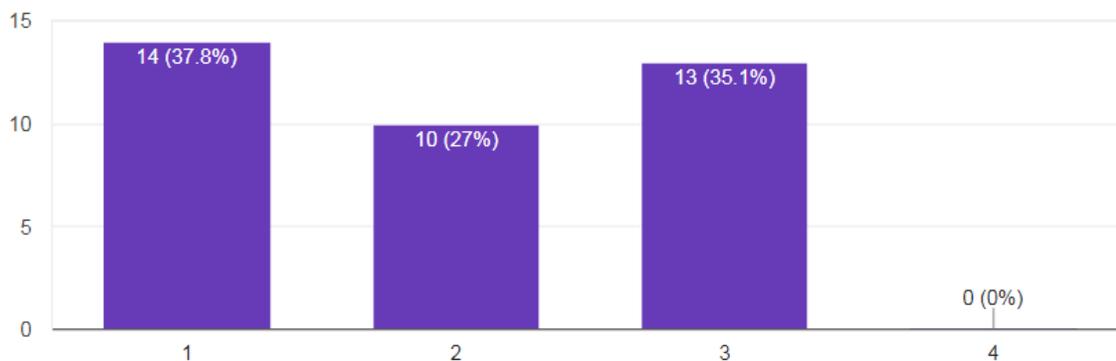
Research Question 1 asked, “What different types of support are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach?”

The first set of questions in the survey focused on addressing the research question looking at the different types of support that are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach. Questions in this section of the survey examined resources such as time and those that are provided with regard to standards-based grading. In addition, the survey reviewed teacher perceptions regarding their opportunities to model or perform given tasks related to the standards-based format. This portion of the survey also focused on the opportunities for collegial interaction and allowance for verbal feedback on teacher use of standards-based grading. It also looked into whether teachers feel as if they have been provided with a

necessary understanding of the differences between traditional grading and standards-based grading. The final set of questions posed to address this research question looked at whether a professional framework within the buildings has been established to support the transformation to the standards-based form of reporting.

In looking at the teacher perceptions of the relative strengths of the ongoing professional development within the district, two areas stood out. The first included the support of their professional learning communities in aiding one another in the transition. The other relative strength of the professional development centered on assisting teachers in developing an understanding of the differences between traditional report cards and standards-based grading.

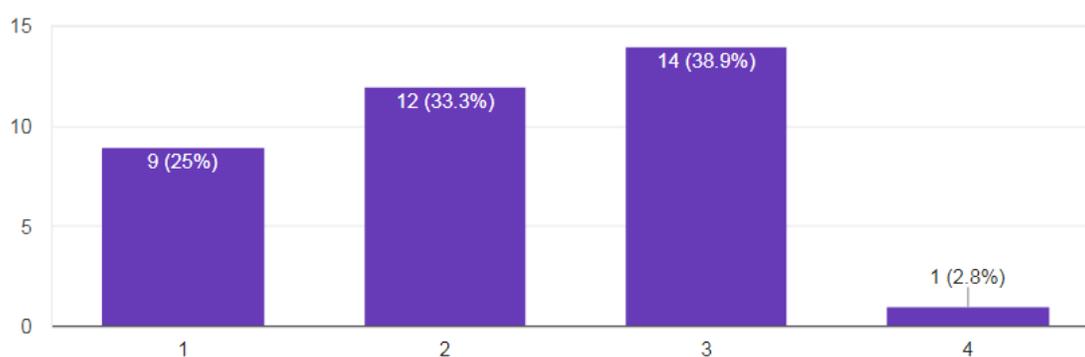
During the focus group interviews with teachers, one of the trends that arose centered on a focus for the district in identifying the benefits of a shift to standards-based report cards. They identified that the district was focused on explaining why this shift to standards-based reporting would be occurring as well as the benefits that it could have for communicating student learning. When looking at survey responses, a relative strength in comparison to other questions was an explanation during the professional development of how these two forms of grading differed from one another. In the survey, 35.1% of the teachers felt as though the district did a thorough job of providing this explanation as explained in Figure 7.



*Figure 7.* Support from Professional Learning Community.

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The school district for the research study has spent time and effort providing resources to support the growth of professional learning communities for each of the schools. This is further explained in Figure 8. Surveyed teachers also felt their professional learning community framework within the school was a relative strength in providing the necessary support for shifting to standards-based grading. A total of 41.7% of the teachers surveyed felt their experiences within their professional learning community surrounded by building-level peers aided them in their understanding of standards-based grading.

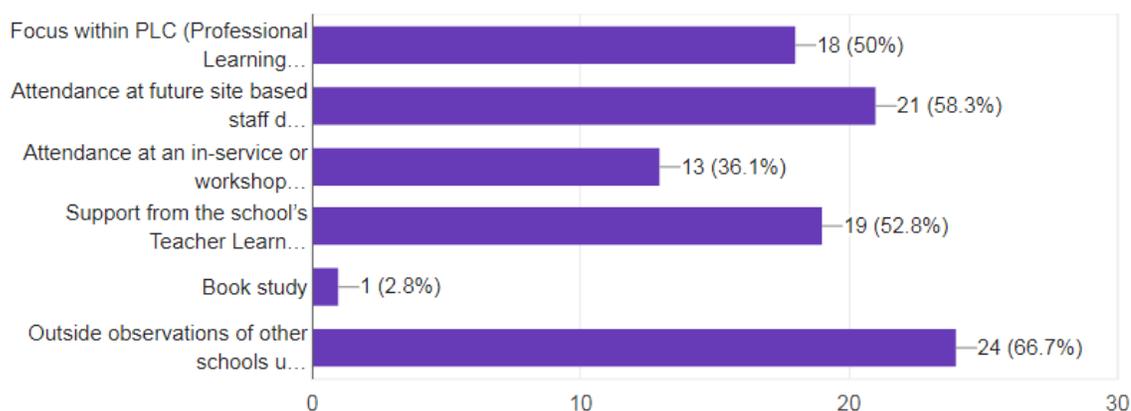


*Figure 8.* Additional Support Strategies for Utilization of Standards-Based Grading.

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One of the responses from the quantitative survey results that reflected the

responses from the focus groups and qualitative findings centered on strategies the district could incorporate to support teachers during the transition from traditional grading to a standards-based report card. Figure 9 provides a better understanding of these results. Nearly 67% of the teachers who participated in the survey felt the strategy that could aid them the most focused on providing them with outside observations of other schools that are utilizing a standards-based report card. While there are relatively few districts in the state that currently utilize standards-based reporting, teachers felt like having fellow colleagues as a resource could provide support and aid in the transition. The next three responses that received the highest ratings focused on more site-based support. These responses included 58% of the teachers who felt like attendance at future site-based staff development would provide assistance. Another 52.8% of the teachers felt like support from the teacher learning coach in each of the buildings could aid them further in their implementation efforts. The fourth highest response centered around an increased focus on standards-based grading in their grade level professional learning community meetings.



*Figure 9.* Teacher Preference for Future Types of Support Regarding Utilization of Standards-Based Grading.

Teachers preferred the opportunity to view or visit other schools that have been using the standards-based report card as a means of gaining insight from colleagues.

Attendance at site-based staff development and support from the school's teacher learning coach were also highly supported based on survey feedback as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Survey Data Regarding Needed District Support for the Transition to Standards-Based Grading*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am given sufficient time and resources to implement the standards-based grading reform.	23.7%	47.4%	28.9%	0%
Professional development activities provided me with opportunities to model or perform given tasks related to using standards-based grading in the classroom.	54.1%	27%	18.9%	0%
Professional development activities provided me with the opportunities to observe others demonstrating the necessary skills to carry out standards-based grading.	52.6%	34.2%	10.5%	0%
Professional development activities provided opportunities for colleagues to offer verbal feedback or support on my use of standards-based grading practices.	47.4%	36.8%	13.2%	2.6%
The professional learning community framework within my school provided necessary support for shifting to standards-based grading.	24.3%	35.1%	37.8%	2.7%
Professional development aided me in my understanding of the differences between traditional reports cards and standards-based reporting.	36.8%	28.9%	34.2%	0%
Professional development assisted me in learning how to incorporate standards-based grading within lesson planning.	50%	34.2%	15.8%	0%
Professional development enabled me to see what implementation of standards-based instruction looks like in the classroom.	59.5%	27%	13.5%	0%
Materials provided in the sessions were helpful in broadening my understanding of how to implement standards-based grading.	63.2%	21.1%	15.8%	0%

Based on the results presented in Table 1, teachers who participated in the survey emphasized a need for further support in matching lesson design and instructional

practices. The teachers noted a need for reinforcement in the instructional component tied to professional development. As referenced earlier in the work by Tomlinson (2000), it is important that teachers are cognizant in looking at how to utilize the standards in meeting the different needs of students in the classroom. These findings are also in line with recommendations made by Erickson (2011) calling for a need for teacher support in effective instructional practices and assessment methods that coincide with standards-based grading.

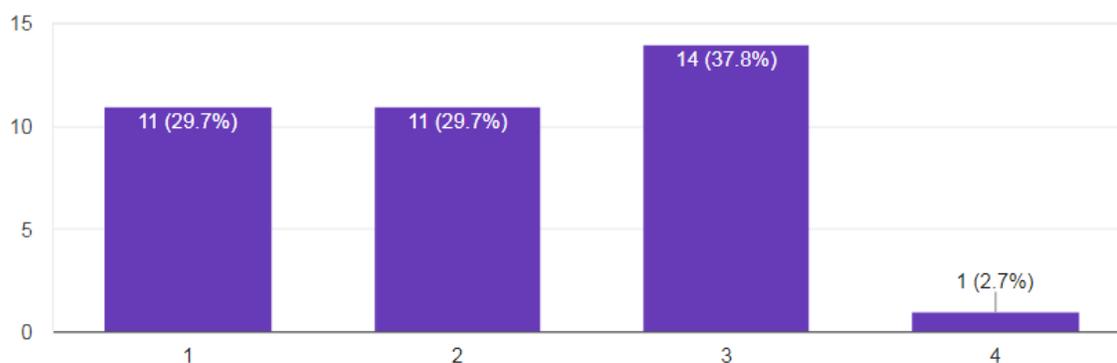
As mentioned previously, the largest percentage of teachers taking the survey felt like outside observation of peers successfully integrating standards-based grading would be the most beneficial; however, in looking at Section 1 of the survey, the question that garnered the highest disapproval rating centered on the inability to provide outside observation of other teachers utilizing grading practices associated with standards-based grading.

### **Quantitative Results for Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked, “How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?”

The second research question addressed in the survey focused on gaining data in relation to how the professional development aided teachers in their understanding of how to use formative assessment. This involved looking at formative assessment as a means for determining student understanding related to given standards on the standards-based report card. The following survey questions looked at how teachers felt they were informed about how to use data as a means of improving practices as well as looking at how it supported them in communicating the levels of student understanding.

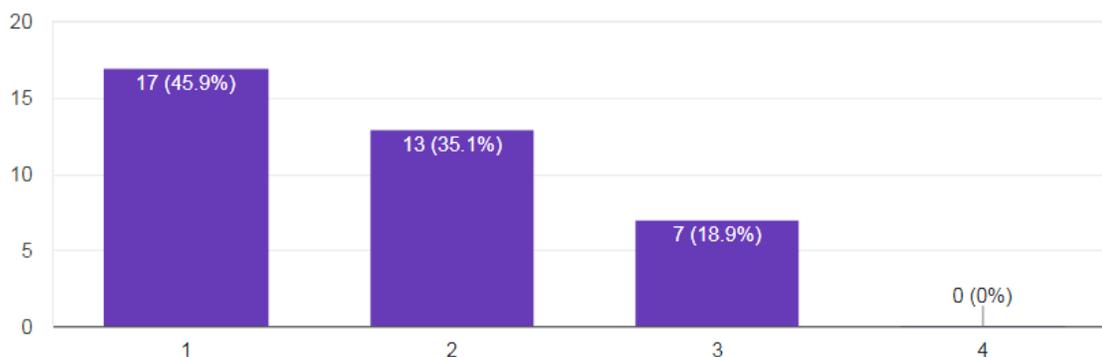
The first question honed in on how teachers felt professional development included instruction in the use of data and assessments to improve classroom practices as shown in Figure 10. In comparison to other questions from the survey geared around the use of formative assessment, this was a relative strength within the district. Of the responses gathered from the survey, 2.7% of the participants strongly agreed, 37.8% responded that they agreed, 29.7% of the participants disagreed, and 29.7% strongly disagreed.



*Figure 10.* Professional Development Includes Instruction in the Use of Data and Assessments to Improve Classroom Practices.

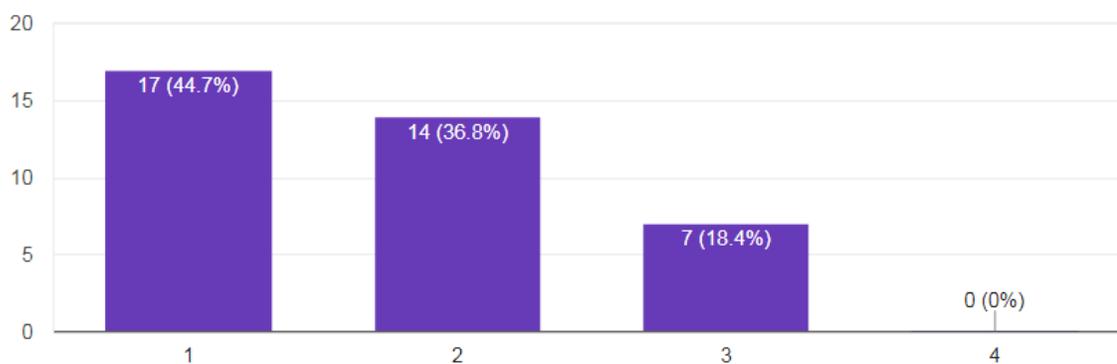
While teachers did feel that the professional development supported them in their understanding of formative assessment, fewer respondents felt like this information aided them in the communication piece associated with standards-based grading. Figure 11 provides a more detailed understanding of these responses. In responding to the question of whether or not professional development provided skills needed to analyze and use formative assessment data to communicate grades on a standards-based report card, a predominant amount did not agree. Other responses included 18.9% of teachers agreed that the professional development aided them in the area of communication when discussing this with stakeholders such as parents or students. No teachers strongly agreed

that the professional development supported them, 35.1% of the teachers disagreed, and 45.9% responded that they strongly disagreed. This was also reinforced by similar responses with teachers during the focus group sessions.



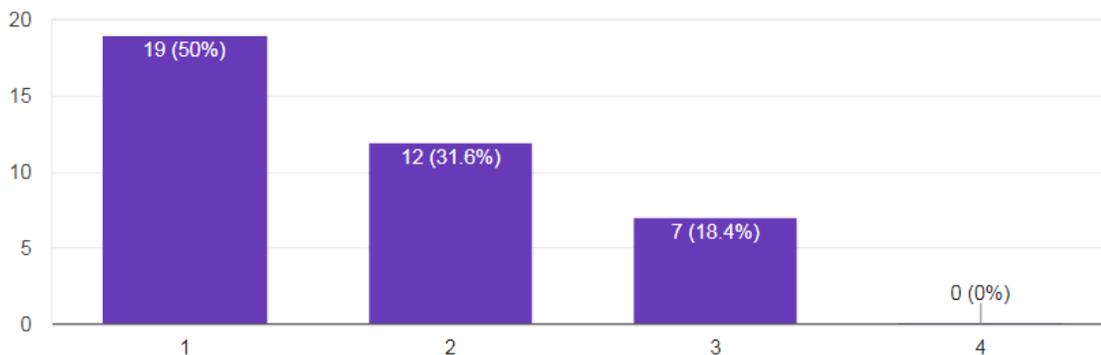
*Figure 11.* Professional Development Provided Skills Needed to Analyze and Use Formative Assessment Data to Communicate Grades on a Standards-Based Report Card.

Another area respondents struggled with in the survey looked at how professional development enabled teachers in defining mastery for a given standard when assessing students and meeting benchmarks. This is shown in Figure 12. None of the teachers surveyed strongly agreed that the professional development supported them in this area, 18.4% of the teachers agreed, 36.8% disagreed, and the largest number of respondents strongly disagreed at 44.7%.



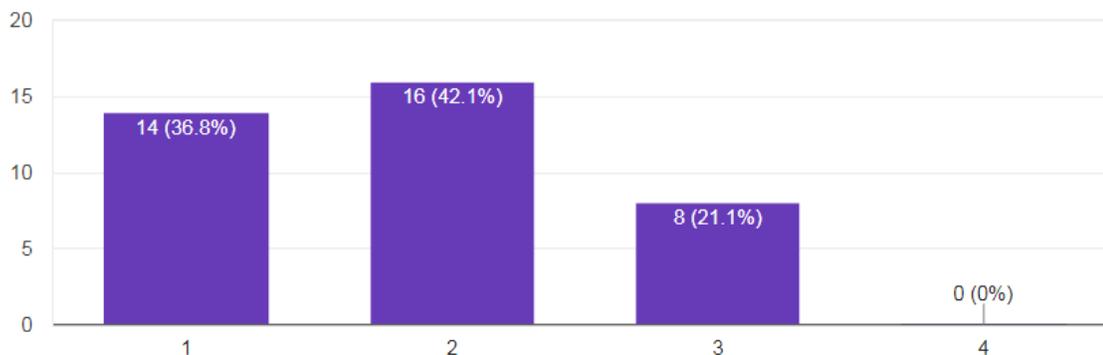
*Figure 12.* Professional Development Enabled Me to Define Mastery for a Given Standard when Assessing Students and Meeting Benchmarks.

Figure 13 illustrates survey participant perceptions of how the professional development provided support on appropriate grading practices and definitions of mastery, proficiency, beginning, and not demonstrated. Fifty percent of those surveyed responded that they strongly disagreed, 31.6% of the teachers disagreed, 18.4% responded with agree, and none of the teachers who participated responded with strongly agree. Findings from these responses also support some of the discoveries that were made during the qualitative portion of the study in relation to teacher struggles with the grading rubrics and the learning progression along the continuum.



*Figure 13.* Professional Development Provided Support on Appropriate Grading Practices and Definitions of Mastery, Proficiency, Beginning, and Not Demonstrated.

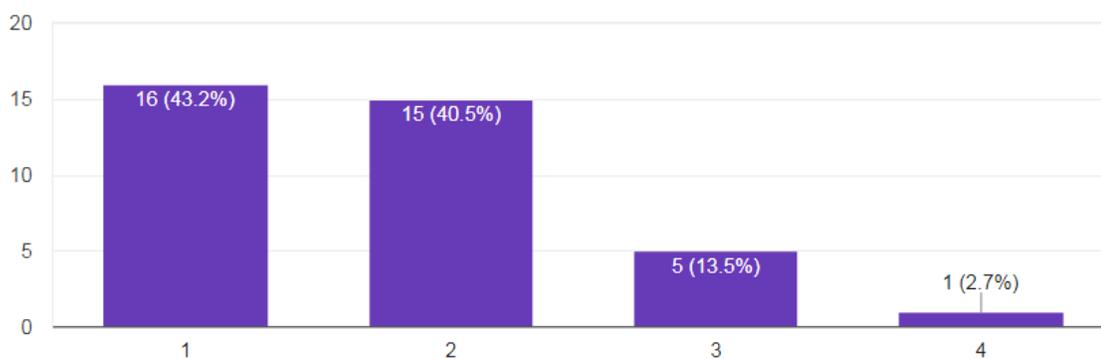
In assessing how professional development served as a support in identifying learning targets and communicating that in reporting, a larger contingency of teachers felt that additional support could be utilized. This is further explained in Figure 14 as 36.8% of those surveyed responded that they strongly disagreed, 42.1% of the teachers disagreed, 21.1% responded with agree, and none of the teachers who participated responded with strongly agree.



*Figure 14.* Professional Development Served as a Support in Identifying Learning Targets and Communicating that in Reporting.

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When asked if professional development enabled teachers to learn the kinds of evidence that are needed in order to determine if the student has mastered the skills, 2.7% of the teachers strongly agreed, 13.5% responded that they agreed, 40.5% responded that they disagreed, and 43.2% responded that they strongly disagreed, as shown in Figure 15.



*Figure 15.* Professional Development Enabled Teachers to Learn the Kinds of Evidence that are Needed in Order to Determine if the Student has Mastered the Skills.

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A collective look at the group responses regarding formative assessment practices with standards-based grading revealed that teachers felt this was an area where they could use more support, as detailed in Table 2. This is important to note when looking at research in this area as it relates to the implementation of standards-based grading.

Table 2

*Survey Data Regarding How Standards-Based Grading Impacted Teacher Assessment Practices*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Professional development includes instruction in the use of data and assessments to inform classroom practices.	29.7%	29.7%	37.8%	2.7%
Professional development provided skills needed to analyze and use formative assessment data to communicate grades on a standards-based report card.	45.9%	35.1%	18.9%	0%
Professional development aided me in identifying learning targets and communicating that in reporting.	36.8%	42.1%	21.1%	0%
Professional development enabled me to learn what kinds of evidence are needed in order to determine if the student has mastered the skills.	43.2%	40.5%	13.5%	2.7%
Professional development enabled me to define mastery for a given standard when assessing students and meeting benchmarks.	44.7%	36.8%	18.4%	0%
Professional development provided support on appropriate grading practices and definitions of Mastery, Proficiency, Beginning, and Not Demonstrated.	50%	31.6%	18.4%	0%
Professional development provided the needed skills to develop rubrics to evaluate student learning related to standards.	52.6%	31.6%	15.8%	0%

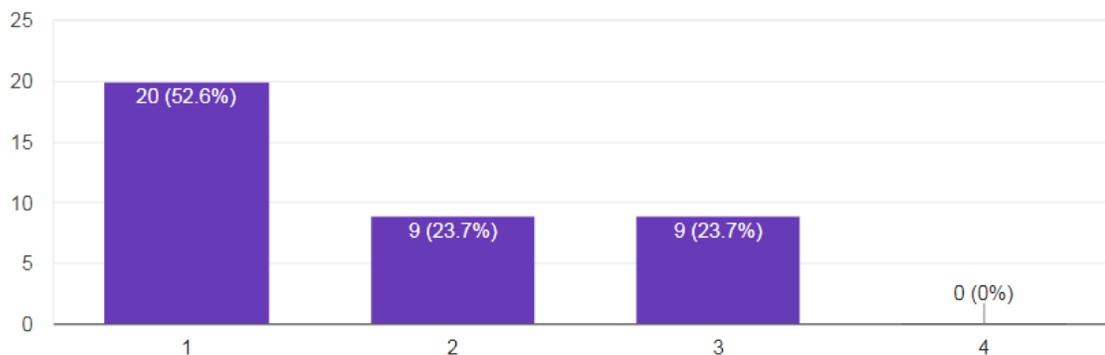
Based on the survey results displayed in Table 2, there is also a call from teachers for support in the instructional component tied to the staff development efforts in the district. Teachers have expressed further need in determining the types of evidence needed in order to determine whether or not students have mastered particular standards.

In addition, a large number of respondents called for additional support in utilizing rubrics to evaluate student assessments. The rubric component tied to standards-based grading is critically important for teachers to understand in order to determine student mastery of the standards.

### **Quantitative Results for Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked, “What factors have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?”

The survey question addressing factors that have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and implement standards-based grading asked teachers to rate professional development activities based on what they felt would support them the most, as shown in Table 3. This is further explained in Figure 16. Answer choices included the demonstration or modeling of a skill, practicing standards-based grading under simulated conditions, receiving feedback about their performance, or coaching in the workplace; with 52.6% of the teachers participating in the survey responding that they would be supported the most through demonstration or modeling how to incorporate standards-based grading in their classrooms, 23.7% of the teachers felt that practicing standards-based grading under simulated conditions would aid them the most, and 23.7% of the teachers responded that feedback from others about their performance would be the most helpful.



*Figure 16.* Factors that have the Largest Impact on Teacher Ability to Understand and Implement Standards-Based Grading.

Table 3

*Survey Data Results for Factors that have the Largest Impact on Teacher Ability to Implement Standards-Based Grading*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Follow-up training from professional development opportunities that helped me improve my understanding of how to successfully implement standards-based grading.	52.6%	28.9%	18.4%	0%
Samples of grade books provided during professional development provided clarity regarding the organization of grades and how assignments fit given standards.	65.8%	21.1%	13.2%	0%
The follow up sessions aided me in understanding and implementing standards-based grading.	63.2%	21.1%	15.8%	0%
The staff development focused on the exploration of theory into the background of standards-based grading aided me in my implementation of standards-based grading. 1) The demonstration or modeling of a skill 2) Practices of the skill under simulated conditions 3) Feedback about performance 4) Coaching in the workplace	52.6%	23.7%	23.7%	0%

Based on teacher feedback represented in Table 3, teachers expressed a need for learning more about the practical methods of recording student assessment or learning within grade books. In addition to the logistical component of record keeping, teachers also identified the need for demonstration or modeling of how to implement standards-based grading. The final component focuses on a continued need for further staff development on the teaching and learning while looking at evaluating student work.

### **Conclusions**

Chapter 4 included the results of this mixed-methods study with a discussion of the impact of professional development and teacher ability to integrate standards-based grading in their classrooms. The chapter began by stating the central focus for the study and its purpose as well as identifying the different research questions and findings. The chapter identified the results from qualitative focus groups with eight teachers and an in-depth interview with one additional teacher to gain further insight into her experiences with the professional development in the district. It also included research findings from a focus group of three principals and an interview with the district's director of elementary curriculum and instruction. Survey data taken from fourth-grade teachers also reinforced themes that emerged during the qualitative portion of the study.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Background of the Study**

Chapter 5 provides a description and interpretation of the data collected in relation to the professional development accompanying the implementation of standards-based grading in a rural school district in North Carolina. This chapter further addresses each of the research questions and implications for future practices.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of standards-based grading in fourth grade in a rural school district in North Carolina. The focus period for the study occurred during the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year. At this point, fourth-grade teachers had gone through professional development efforts provided by the district and a year of implementation. Professional development efforts included a district-wide effort to bring all fourth-grade teachers together to provide an introduction to standards-based grading and a basis for the shift. Other professional development efforts included optional participation in a summer institute conducted by the district that included further support in standards-based instruction and formative assessment. In addition, the district provided optional site-based sessions for grade levels. These were conducted in an effort to support teachers in areas such as standards-based teaching and instruction, formative assessment, and practical ways to utilize Gradebooks to document student learning. Professional learning communities in each of the schools were also utilized as a support for teachers during the implementation process.

The quantitative measurements taken from the teacher survey revealed that teachers felt the need for additional support in a number of different areas. These areas included additional support in practical methods of incorporating standards-based grading in the classroom. In the survey, a large contingency of teachers expressed the need for

additional opportunities to observe others demonstrating the skills to carry out standards-based grading. They also communicated a need for modeling how to utilize standards-based grading in the classroom. Additionally, teachers participating in the survey indicated a need for support in incorporating standards-based grading within lesson planning. Participants did identify that professional development opportunities supported them in the use of data and assessments to inform classroom practices; however, large groups of teachers identified the need to learn more about how to define mastery of given standards on the standards-based report card.

The qualitative results reflected positive experiences with the district-wide session that provided reinforcement for the transition; however, teachers did express a need for further support in utilizing rubrics to assess student progress. Another consistent theme throughout their responses dealt with the utilization of their professional learning communities in their schools as a resource for future support and site-based professional development efforts.

## **Discussion and Interpretation**

The information that follows provides a discussion and summary of the research findings from the study in connection with previous research. The section is organized by the problem statements identified in Chapter 1 of the study. Key themes arose in the areas of professional development associated with the implementation of standards-based grading in the district. Links between previous research and the findings from the study are also identified.

### **Research Question 1**

**What types of support are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach?** The study involved an

analysis of individuals ranging from teachers, building-level leaders, and central office staff. Data revealed an increased need for further support and targeted professional development that could meet the different needs of teachers along the continuum of understanding and implementation. Teachers acknowledged the importance and effort that the district had put into explaining the reasoning and justification behind the shift to standards-based grading; however, teachers acknowledged the importance of targeted staff development in certain areas. Teachers, administrators, and district personnel all point to the need for support in gaining an in-depth understanding of the standards-based grading rubric and what constitutes the different levels of student mastery. Participants also pointed to the need for increased ways to incorporate hands-on learning opportunities during professional development offerings. Based on the findings, participants also acknowledged ongoing support in ways to communicate standards-based grading with parents.

### **In-Depth Understanding of the Rubrics**

The first emergent theme regarding the types of support needed by teachers during the transition to standards-based grading was an in-depth understanding of grading rubrics. When combining the data taken from the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study, teachers expressed an increased need for support in this area. Within the focus groups with teachers, participants acknowledged an increasing need to gain further support in identifying what constitutes the different levels of student achievement in a given standard. During the introductory phases, the district provided initial support through exemplars of rubrics; however, teachers called for additional time and support to break the rubrics down in order to provide clarity. Both teachers and administrators acknowledged the need for teachers to be able to work with one another during their

professional learning communities in order to design rubrics to assess mastery of given standards. Marzano (2010) pointed out that this time enables for consistency between teachers with regard to the utilization and design of rubrics to evaluate student learning in a standards-based report card.

### **Modeling of a Skill and Hands-on Practice**

Participants in the study felt the district's effort to support the justification for the transition to standards-based grading was a positive spring board to begin the paradigm shift needed for the transition to standards-based grading; however, teachers felt a beneficial shift towards future staff development could be incorporated through more hands-on practice and practical application of standards-based grading. The "one size fits all" or traditional whole-group approach dictated by the initial professional development session provided teachers with a justification for the transition to standards-based grading; however, teachers called for more opportunities to work with one another and support staff to practice and receive feedback. Quantitative responses from the study pointed out that 84.2% of the teachers did not feel as though professional development opportunities provided opportunities for verbal feedback in the use of standards-based grading. Another important finding from the research in Chapter 4 revealed that 86.8% of the teachers did not believe professional development activities provided them with the opportunities to observe others demonstrate the necessary skills to carry out standards-based grading. These findings suggest the importance of providing additional support and reinforcement throughout the transition process toward standards-based grading. This is also consistent with components of the training model for staff development calling for the demonstration or modeling of a skill, practices of the skill under simulated conditions, feedback about performance, and coaching in the workplace (Showers et al.,

1987).

### **Communicating with Parents**

During the transition phase, it is important to keep parents abreast of the noted benefits of a transition toward the standards-based report card. As alluded to in the research in Chapter 2, district efforts to transition often meet with resistance as a result of a lack of communication with parents. During the focus group sessions with teachers and administrators, the participants indicated the importance of being able to effectively communicate the results of the standards-based report card. Participants alluded to an important need to be able to identify student progress with parents with regard to progress being made in relation to the different standards. Results from the survey also reinforced these findings. Survey responses showed that 65.7% of the teachers did not feel that professional development aided them with an understanding of the differences between traditional report cards and standards-based grading. This is consistent with the research conducted by Guskey and Munoz (2015) that highlighted the importance of breaking down the standards and effectively communicating student progress towards specific learning goals.

During qualitative focus group sessions, teachers and administrators pointed to the difficulty and frustration in both clarifying and quantifying the different levels specified in the grading rubric. As referenced in the research in Chapter 2, Guskey and Jung (2006) also pointed out several challenges in shifting to a standards-based report card. The first focuses on clarifying the purpose of the report card itself and establishing the importance of effective communication as opposed to simply quantifying the grade that appears on the report card. Effectively communicating the purpose of the standards-based report card allows parents insight in to how it can be utilized to relay valuable

information regarding student learning.

### **Research Question 2**

**How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?** The importance of ongoing formative assessment is crucial within the standards-based form of grading. Based on data taken from the study, participants did note the transition to standards-based grading had impacted the ways in which learning was assessed in the classroom. During interviews and focus group sessions with teachers and administrators, participants pointed to a shift from short answer and multiple-choice forms of assessment towards more authentic learning tasks such as classroom observations and dialogue with students. Teachers also noted that the implementation of standards-based grading has led to them drilling down to determine what individual standards have been mastered. This is consistent with the work referenced in Chapter 2 by Chambers and Dean (2000) that pointed to the use of performance-based assessments including portfolios and ongoing classroom observations of student learning. A relative strength taken from the quantitative surveys also reinforced the positive transition with regard to an ongoing shift in different types of formative assessment.

### **Research Question 3**

**What factors have the largest impact on teacher ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?** The standards-based approach has led to a continued need for teachers to be closely acquainted with the state standards and descriptors that go along with them, as reflected by the work done by Welsh et al. (2013). Data reported in Chapter 4 identified one of the largest factors impacting teacher ability to implement standards-based grading was their understanding of the different standards

and learning objectives outlined in the curriculum. Teachers, administrators, and district personnel in the study all pointed to the need for teachers to be able to break down and unpack the standards in an effort to create quality assessments. Principals participating in the focus group session noted that this is a daunting task requiring additional time for teachers to collaborate during grade level professional learning community meetings.

Providing teachers with opportunities to develop clear performance standards as well as descriptors provides a basis for rubrics that may be utilized in assessing student learning. This is consistent with the work done by O'Connor and Wormeli (2011) who identified that developing clear and concise performance standards followed by descriptors for each of these can provide the basis for rubrics that can be used in the classroom. These provide a reference tool for teachers that can be used during collaborative planning among teachers when evaluating student work.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following study has limitations with respect to the generalizability of findings to different teachers and schools that are considering a transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based report card.

As noted in the limitations section of Chapter 1, the qualitative portion of the study could have been impacted by the willingness of the participants to share candid responses regarding the professional development efforts in the district. The researcher was an administrator in the district at the time of the study. As a result, participants could have refrained from providing honest feedback regarding their experiences. In addition, the researcher was only privy to the lived experiences of the nine teachers who participated in the study; however, through the triangulation of data, common themes did arise within the focus group and interview sessions.

The quantitative portion of the study relied on an online survey that was initially sent via email to all fourth-grade teachers in the district. After initial participation rates were low, the researcher sent a follow-up email to try and gather a larger sample size. The participation rate increased after the second email was sent; however, a larger sample of participants could have increased the ability to glean a larger district-wide teacher perception of their professional development experiences. Due to the timing of the research, the researcher was unable to provide a presurvey to determine the knowledge base of teachers with regard to standards-based grading before the professional development occurred. This could have provided an initial data point to compare to a postsurvey given at the end of the year. A presurvey, given at the beginning of the year, could have allowed for further insight into the growth of teachers and their understanding of standards-based grading from the beginning to the conclusion of the school year.

While the researcher sought to include teachers from different areas of the district, not all schools in the district were represented. The district utilized an initial whole-group session that included all fourth-grade teachers in the district; however, there were other voluntary opportunities for professional growth in the implementation of standards-based grading. Voluntary professional development opportunities were provided through the small-group sessions focusing on standards-based grading at the school system's *EQUIP* conference. In addition, district principals were provided with the option of visits from members of the curriculum and instruction department to conduct break-out sessions with teachers focused on standards-based grading. In this case, there could have been variation between different teachers regarding the level of professional development that occurred.

The scope of the research was limited to only one grade level during a given year

of professional development. The research did not include teachers from Grades K-3 who had gone through the different professional development offerings earlier during the district's implementation.

The results taken from the research done through this study may be useful to further implementation of standards-based grading in future grade levels in the district; however, due to these limitations, other districts must be cautious in generalizing across different settings.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

Although the research identified in Chapter 2 reinforces the positive benefits of implementing standards-based grading, school systems struggle at times with the transition due to inadequate professional development. This purpose of this study was to determine effective staff development practices to improve the level of teacher efficacy in the transition to and implementation of the standards-based form of grading. Based on the results, the following recommendations are being made for future research.

#### **1. Recommendation for Development of a Model**

Any district that is considering implementation of the standards-based report card must be cognizant of the intense and ongoing professional development efforts that are needed. Participants in the study pointed to the importance of having a clear and consistent message across the district in order to maintain a sense of uniformity from school to school. This would ensure that standards-based grading was implemented with consistency and fidelity throughout the district. At the macro level, it will be important for the district to develop and utilize a model for carrying out the professional development in the future. The district is looking to implement standards-based grading during the upcoming year for the fifth grade. Results from the study indicate that the

district would benefit by having a clear framework and model to incorporate effective professional development in the future. The training model discussed earlier in Chapter 3 provides logical steps and follow-up to provide clear progressions along the way during the professional development efforts. The benefits of this model focus on the unique needs identified by both teachers and administrators in the study. These include the demonstration of modeling of a skill, ongoing practice, consistent feedback about performance, and coaching in the workplace.

## 2. Ongoing and Differentiated Professional Development

Based on the findings from this study, it would also be important to recognize the individual site-based needs of the different schools. Teachers and principals identified that it will be imperative to continue to support previous grade levels to also meet their needs. Focused planning time and efforts must be spent on understanding the rubrics and assessments for the different standards. In addition, findings indicate that it will be beneficial for teachers to be able to work collaboratively within their professional learning communities to assess student work products and formative assessments. This will ensure that their grading practices are aligned based on their understanding of the rubrics. Future efforts will need to be twofold. There will be a need for targeted and differentiated professional development of specific schools and teachers. The district may also look to provide different avenues and resources for teachers to learn and grow during time that is available or convenient for them. This may include the district's creation of webcasts, videos, and online resources that target the different needs of teachers.

Results from the study demonstrated the benefits of having an introductory session involving all fourth-grade teachers from the district; however, findings also

indicated the need for capacity building within the individual schools. As referenced earlier in Chapter 4, the school system has allocated a teacher learning coach for each of the schools. These individuals meet collectively once a week to identify ways to support teachers within their buildings. Many any of the teacher learning coaches have not had intensive training in the implementation of standards-based grading; therefore, providing continued guidance and understanding of how to successfully support their teachers would be a logical next step.

### **Conclusion**

The assessment of student learning and grading practices has continued to evolve over the course of time. With the accountability efforts set forth that led to continuity of learning standards throughout our states, standards-based grading became a part of this evolution and shift in thinking in terms of grading. While a relative few number of counties have made this shift in North Carolina, other states have both started and continued to utilize the standards-based grading approach as a means of communicating student learning. In order for a paradigm shift in grading practices to be effective, the quality and vision for the professional development efforts will be incredibly important. Regardless of their levels of experience, few teachers have participated in professional development or gone through classes at the university level focused on standards-based assessment. As referenced in Chapter 2, the implementation of standards-based grading has failed at times as a result of professional development efforts that accompany the reform efforts. Other districts, such as the Osseo School District in Minnesota, have struggled with the implementation of standards-based grading as a result of inadequate staff training during the introductory phases.

The benefits of the effective implementation of standards-based grading may

provide a clearer picture of student learning and communicate student progress based on the standards that are outlined in the report card. The inconsistency of traditional grading is documented and referenced throughout the research identified throughout Chapters 1 and 2; however, without focused professional development efforts aligned with a shift to standards-based grading, these inconsistencies can continue to exist.

As different forms of student assessment and grading reform efforts continue to evolve in our country, it will be important to continue to look into the professional development efforts that accompany this type of reform. This study does seek to provide pertinent and relevant information to one district's effort to bring about grading reform; however, it will be valuable to look at future research and studies into the implementation efforts of other districts. It would be beneficial to look at districts that are witnessing success and researching the steps they are taking that are leading to those outcomes. There are many benefits to the standards-based report card in communicating detailed information into a student's learning and progress in the classroom; however, the success of the implementation efforts will hinge on the quality of the professional development efforts that coincide with the shift.

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Appendix A  
Interview Documents

### Teacher Focus Group Questions

1. Think about your three most favorable experiences with staff development or training sessions.
2. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your system's staff development program for standards-based grading? How could it be improved and what support would be needed? Think about why these sessions were so memorable to you. What made these sessions so effective and memorable?
3. What are the weaknesses or what do you feel like the district could improve to aid or allow you to feel more effective?
4. How has the small group sessions aided you in gaining the skills needed that the large group did not or has it expounded on your knowledge?
5. What types of staff development did you find most helpful in aiding you as a learner? Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, physiological states?
6. How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?
7. How has your thinking changed, if at all about the distinction between formative and summative assessment in your classroom?
8. What factors have the largest impact on teachers' ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?
9. What has impacted your understanding of standards based grading the most, as you began the transition from traditional grading to the standards based grading process?
10. Share with me what additional professional development is needed, and by who, to help you continue on this process.

**Director of Elementary Curriculum and Instruction Interview Questions**

1. Explain the model that the district has utilized in developing the training sessions for 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers?
2. What steps has the district taken to increase teacher's feelings of comfort in the ability to implement standards-based grading?
3. During the training sessions, how has the district incorporated some of the following components?
  - a. Exploration of theory behind standards-based grading
  - b. Demonstration of the model skill
  - c. Practice of the skill under simulated conditions
  - d. Feedback about performance
  - e. Coaching in the workplace
4. How has the district tried to overcome the challenges faced by teachers with regards to standards-based grading?
5. What resources do you feel have been provided that have been useful in the implementation process?

### **Principal Focus Group Questions**

1. Describe your experiences as a building leader and your understanding of how teachers are implementing standards-based grading.
2. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being very consistent and 1 being not consistent at all, how would you rate consistency among the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers concerning standards-based grading practices?
3. How have your teachers utilized rubrics as a form of evaluating student work?
4. What are relative strengths regarding your teachers experiences with the staff development training?
5. What are some of the common obstacles you see your teachers facing at this time?
6. What types of support are needed by teachers as they continue the transition into the standards-based form of grading?
7. How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices that your teachers are using in the classroom?
8. What factors have the largest impact on teachers' ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?

Appendix B

Professional Development for Standards-Based Grading Teacher Survey Questionnaire

### Demographic Information

1. How many total years have you been employed as an educator?
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-10 years
  - 11-20 years
  - 20+ years
2. How many years have you been employed in the district in which you are currently working?
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-10 years
  - 11-20 years
  - 20+ years

### Instructions:

**On a scale of 1-4 please rate each of the following questions: 4 – strongly agree, 3 – agree, 2 – disagree, 1 – strongly disagree**

### **What types of support are needed by teachers as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach?**

3. I am given sufficient time and resources to implement the standards-based grading reform.
4. Professional development activities provided me with opportunities to model or perform given tasks related to using standards-based grading in the classroom.
5. Professional development activities provided me with the opportunities to observe others demonstrating the necessary skills to carry out standards-based grading.
6. Professional development activities provided opportunities for colleagues to offer verbal feedback or support on my use of standards-based grading practices.
7. The Professional Learning Community framework within my school provided necessary support for shifting to standards-based grading.
8. Professional development aided me in my understanding of the differences between traditional reports cards and standards-based reporting.
9. Professional development assisted me in learning how to incorporate standards-based grading within lesson planning.
10. Professional development enabled me to see what implementation of standards-based instruction looks like in the classroom.
11. Materials provided in the sessions were helpful in broadening my understanding of how to implement standards-based grading.
12. District professional development could be improved through which of the following types of support. Select all that apply:
  - Focus within PLC (Professional Learning Community)
  - Attendance at future site based staff development with grade level peers and district officials
  - Attendance at an in-service or workshop lasting one or more days

- Support from the school's Teacher Learning Coach
- Book study
- Outside observations of other schools using standards-based grading

**How has the shift to standards-based grading impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning?**

13. Professional development includes instruction in the use of data and assessments to inform classroom practices.
14. Professional development provided skills needed to analyze and use formative assessment data to communicate grades on a standards-based report card.
15. Professional development aided me in identifying learning targets and communicating that in reporting.
16. Based on the professional development discussions, how often did you change your current practices regarding..
17. Professional development enabled me to learn what kinds of evidence are needed in order to determine if the student has mastered the skills.
18. Professional development enabled me to define mastery for a given standard when assessing students and meeting benchmarks.
19. Professional development provided support on appropriate grading practices and definitions of Mastery, Proficiency, Beginning, and Not Demonstrated.
20. Professional development provided the needed skills to develop rubrics to evaluate student learning related to standards.

**What factors have the largest impact on teachers' ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading?**

21. Follow-up training from professional development opportunities that help me improve my understanding of how to successfully implement standards-based grading.
22. Samples of grade books provided during professional development provided clarity regarding the organization of grades and how assignments fit given standards.
23. The follow up sessions aided me in understanding and implementing standards-based grading.
24. The staff development focused on the exploration of theory into the background of standards-based grading aided me in my implementation of standards-based grading.
  - The demonstration or modeling of a skill
  - Practices of the skill under simulated conditions
  - Feedback about performance
  - Coaching in the workplace

Appendix C

Permission to Conduct Study

Date: Tuesday, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018  
 Dr. XXXXXXXX, Superintendent of the XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
 CO: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Dr. XXXXXXXX,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study involving participants within the school district. I am currently enrolled in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at Gardner-Webb University. I am in the process of writing my dissertation on the implementation of standards-based grading and the accompanying professional development.

Research questions for the study focus on the relationship between teacher's self-efficacy and using standards-based reporting with respect to their professional development. The qualitative study will look to identify the types of support that teachers feel are needed as they transition from a traditional form of grading to a standards-based approach. The research will also look to see how the shift to standards-based grading has impacted the different methods and forms of assessment practices related to student learning. The final component looks to address the factors that have the largest impact on teachers' ability to understand and successfully implement standards-based grading.

I am hoping that the district will allow me to interview 15 teachers for the study. If given approval, I am looking for a sample of teachers who have attended district training sessions related to the implementation of standards-based grading within 4<sup>th</sup> Grade. I am also looking to set up a focus group of five principals from the district to gather their input on obstacles that their teachers face and ways that we can potentially work to overcome them. The last participant for the study is the district's Director of Elementary Curriculum. The purpose of this interview is to gather feedback regarding professional development offerings and looking toward future growth in this area.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to conduct the research and hope that the findings will be able to support the district in future endeavors related to staff development and implementation efforts for standards-based grading. If you agree, please sign the consent allowing me to conduct the research utilizing the district participants. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Brayton Leonhardt  
 Doctoral Candidate  
 Gardner-Webb University

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_