

**Grading and Reporting in a Standards-Based Environment:  
Implications for Students with Special Needs**

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## **Abstract**

Teachers at all levels of education today struggle in their efforts to assign fair, accurate, and meaningful grades to students with disabilities, especially those placed in general education classrooms. Lacking specific policies or recommendations, most teachers apply informal, individual grading adaptations for such students. Although these idiosyncratic adaptations are made to ensure continued effort and protect these students' self-images, the result is grades that communicate little about the students' actual performance or level of achievement. This article describes a 5-step process that teachers can use to provide fair and meaningful grades to students with disabilities within a standards-based classroom environment.

## **Introduction**

Among the challenges educators face in implementing standards-based reforms, none is more daunting than communicating students' academic performance to families and others through grades and report cards. This challenge becomes all the more difficult when standards-based reforms are combined with inclusive programs that educate students with special needs in general education classrooms. Teachers at all levels of education today struggle in their efforts to assign fair, accurate, and meaningful grades to students with special needs.

To become active participants in education programs, families need specific information about their children's learning strengths, areas of struggle, and what can be done at home to promote success. Grades and report cards represent a primary source of that information. But traditional report cards that record only a single grade for each subject area seldom offer that level of detail. A standards-based report card, on the other hand, that includes grades or marks based on carefully articulated learning standards in each subject area, provides families with the

specific feedback they require to ensure that improvement efforts are appropriately focused and more likely to succeed (Guskey, 2001).

Families of children with disabilities find the detailed information offered through standards-based reporting especially vital as they consider placement and intervention decisions. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and 2004 recognizes this critical need and requires that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams plan and document how progress will be monitored and communicated for students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d) (1) (A)). Yet, despite this legal provision and widespread agreement on its importance, evidence indicates there is less compliance with appropriate progress monitoring than with any other IEP requirement (Etscheidt, 2006).

### **Grading Challenges in Special Education**

The number of students with disabilities included in general classes, as well as the amount of time they spend there, has increased dramatically in recent years (Handler, 2003). Although a wealth of research verifies the positive effects of including students with disabilities (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; Waldron, 1998), the process poses unique challenges for grading and reporting. Should the grades for these students be based on grade level standards, for example, or should grades somehow be adapted? Should the grades be based on achievement only, or should teachers also consider effort, progress made, or some other combination of factors?

For students whose education occurs primarily in special education classrooms, the special education teacher typically assigns most grades. General education teachers determine grades only for the few subject areas in which students are included. For students with disabilities who are fully included in general classrooms, however, the division of grading

responsibilities is less clear (Bursuck, Polloway, Plante, Epstein, Jayanthi, & McConeghy, 1996; Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Roderique, McConeghy, & Jayanthi, 1994).

A common strategy for grading students who are included involves the general education teacher taking responsibility for assigning all grades on the report card, and the special education teacher taking responsibility for a separate report on progress toward IEP goals. Although this seems logical, deciding the appropriate grade for a general education content area can be especially complicated if performance in that content area is affected by the disability.

Take, for example, an 8th grade student who is unable to demonstrate proficiency on 8th grade standards because of multiple, severe disabilities, but has worked hard and progressed well toward IEP goals. To fail this student, who has shown tremendous effort and progress, clearly seems unfair. Nevertheless, giving passing marks to a student who has not yet met performance standards for that grade level also seems inappropriate. Complicating matters still further are the legal requirements of grading students with disabilities. Most notably, IEPs must “enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade” (*Board of Education v. Rowley*, 1982, p. 4). Therefore, a failing grade for a student receiving special education services is considered an indication that appropriate educational services were not provided.

### **Grading Adaptations**

Despite increased numbers of students with disabilities being included in general education classrooms for greater portions of the school day, little guidance has come from the special education community to address the challenge of grading included students. Lacking specific policies or recommendations, most general education teachers make informal, individual grading adaptations for such students (Bursuck, Munk, & Olson, 1999; Polloway et al., 1994). These adaptations generally fall into five broad categories: (a) considering progress on IEP

goals; (b) measuring progress over time; (c) prioritizing assignments or content differently; (d) considering indicators of effort or behavior; and (e) modifying the weights or scales for grading (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005).

Suppose, for example, that a student with a disability demonstrates C-level achievement in social studies for a grading period when that student's performance is evaluated in the same way as class peers. The teacher might implement a grading adaptation that gives this student extra points for surpassing IEP goals (adaptation #1) or for exerting exceptional effort (adaptation #4). Theoretically, these adaptations provide encouragement and opportunities for success. Evidence indicates, however, that such adaptations typically lead students to see grades not as an indication of their performance, but, instead, as a reflection of who they are. The result tends to be decreased motivation and a diminished sense of efficacy (Ring & Reetz, 2000). Furthermore, even with these adaptations, most students in special education continue to receive low passing grades, placing them at risk for low self-esteem and for dropping out of school (Donahue & Zigmond, 1990).

### **Implications of Standards-Based Grading**

The move to standards-based grading and reporting further complicates efforts to assign fair and accurate grades to students with disabilities. Although basing the grades for all such students solely on grade-level standards is clearly inappropriate, most of the adaptations teachers make are ill-suited to the intent of standards-based grading.

When teachers assign grades on the basis of specific learning standards, the meaning of a grade changes from an overall assessment of learning (e.g., How did this student perform in language arts?) to a description of students' performance on a discrete set of skills (e.g., How well did the student master the ability to identify the plot, setting, and characters in reading

passages?). This shift in focus to assigning grades based on precise levels of performance with regard to articulated learning standards makes the task of grading students with disabilities much more challenging (Thurlow, 2002). To provide more meaningful, useful, and interpretable information on achievement that can be used in making decisions about students with disabilities in a standards-based environment, more effective grading practices are sorely needed.

### **Setting a Solid Foundation**

To assign fair and accurate standards-based grades to students in special education, schools must first develop a high-quality grading and reporting system for all students (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Grading policies based on thoughtful and well-reasoned standards for student learning help resolve many of the problems associated with grading students in special education. The initial step in establishing a high-quality, standards-based grading system requires that teachers distinguish three types of learning criteria and related standards (Guskey, 1996, 2004):

- *Product* criteria focus on what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time. They relate to students' specific achievements or level of proficiency based on culminating demonstrations of learning, such as final examinations; final reports, projects, exhibits, or portfolios; or other overall assessments of learning.
- *Process* criteria relate to what students did in reaching their current level of achievement and proficiency. They include elements such as effort, class behavior, and work habits. They also might include evidence from daily work, regular classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, or punctuality of assignments.
- *Progress* criteria consider how much students gain from their learning experiences. In other words, they focus on how far students have come, rather than where they are

(Guskey, 1996, 2006; Guskey & Jung, 2006). Other names for progress criteria include learning gain, improvement scoring, value-added learning, and educational growth. Most of the current research evidence on progress criteria comes from studies of individualized instruction (Esty & Teppo, 1992) and special education programs (Gersten, Vaughn, & Brengelman, 1996).

Because of concerns about the social and emotional consequences of grading, most teachers base the grades they assign on some combination of these three types of criteria (Brookhart, 1993; Frary, Cross, & Weber, 1993). The majority of teachers also vary the criteria they employ from student to student, taking into account individual circumstances (Truog & Friedman, 1996). Although teachers do this in an effort to be fair, the result is a *hodgepodge* grade that is difficult for parents or students to interpret (Brookhart, 1991; Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1996; Cross & Frary, 1996; Friedman & Frisbie, 1995; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). An A, for example, may mean that the student knew what the teacher expected before instruction began (product), did not learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress).

High-quality grading and reporting systems establish clear standards for product, process, and progress criteria, and then report each separately (Guskey, 1994, 2006; Stiggins, 2008; Wiggins, 1996). Schools that have implemented such systems typically find that it makes grading easier for teachers. No more information needs to be gathered and debates about how best to combine these diverse types of evidence into a single grade are avoided (Bailey & McTighe, 1996). Teachers also report that students take homework, effort, and other work habits more seriously when those grades are reported separately (Guskey, 2006). Parents generally prefer this approach because it gives them more detailed, prescriptive information about their children's performance in school (Guskey, 2002). And for parents of students in special

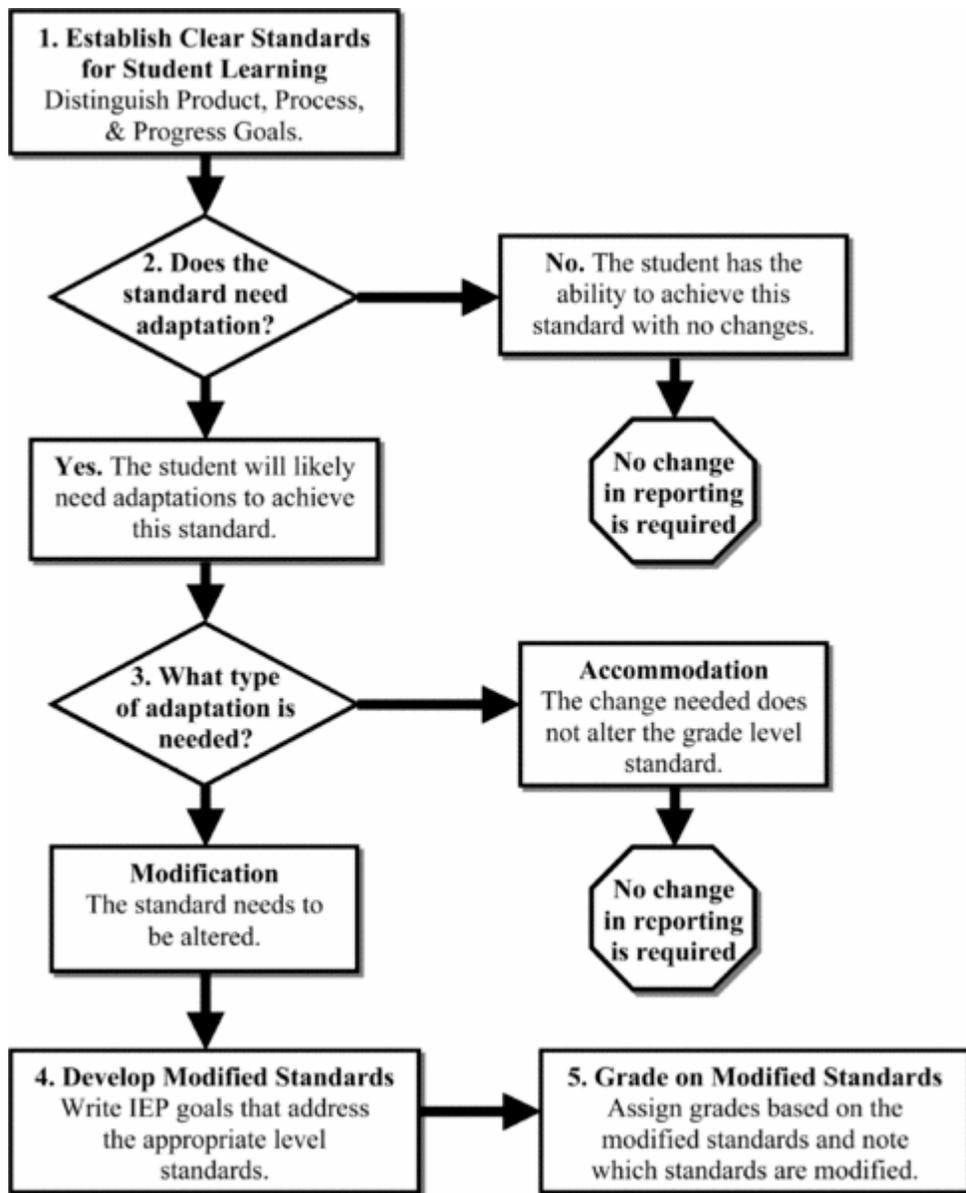
education, it means they not only receive specific feedback about their children's achievement on grade level standards, but also essential information on effort and progress that can be key to making appropriate intervention and placement decisions (Jung & Guskey, 2007).

### **Inclusive Grading Model**

To guide educators in the process of developing appropriate policies for grading students with disabilities, we developed the Five-Step, Inclusive Grading Model (Jung, 2009; Jung & Guskey, 2007). Our model, shown in Figure 1, is designed to fit standards-based learning environments and meet the legal requirements for reporting on the progress of students who have IEPs. The five steps of the model include: (a) Establish clear standards for student learning that distinguish product, process, and progress goals; (b) for each standard, determine if it needs to be adapted for the student; (c) if adaptation is needed, determine if that adaptation requires accommodation or modification; (d) if modification is required, develop an appropriate modified standard; and (e) assign a grade or mark based on the modified standard and note on the report card which standards have been modified. Let us consider each of these steps in detail.

#### **Step 1: Establish Clear Standards for Student Learning That Distinguish Product, Process, and Progress Goals**

An essential first step in developing an effective standards-based reporting system is to establish clear learning standards related to product, process, and progress goals. Then, based on explicit indicators of these goals, teachers assign separate grades to each. In this way grades or marks for learning skills, effort, work habits, or learning progress are kept distinct from assessments of achievement and performance. The intent is to provide a better, more accurate, and much more comprehensive picture of students' performance in school (Guskey, 2006).



**Figure 1. Five-Step Inclusive Grading Model.**

The key to success in reporting multiple grades, however, rests in the clear specification of indicators related to the product, process, and progress learning goals. Teachers must be able to describe clearly how they plan to evaluate students' achievement, attitude, effort, behavior, and progress. Then they must clearly communicate these criteria to students, families, and others.

## **Step 2: For Each Standard, Determine if It Needs to Be Adapted for the Student**

Every student who qualifies for special education must have an IEP that outlines a specific plan of individualized annual goals, along with instructional strategies and adaptations needed to reach these goals. The student's IEP team, composed of the parents or guardians, the special education teacher, the regular education teacher, and related administrators, meets at least once per year to discuss progress and to update the IEP.

Considering each grade level standard individually, teams should first consider whether or not any adaptation is needed. Often teams decide that the student has the ability to achieve the standard as described for that grade level. In these cases, no change in the standard or in reporting is needed. At other times, however, teams may decide that the student will likely need adaptations to achieve this standard. When this is true, teams move to Step 3.

## **Step 3: If Adaptation Is Needed, Determine if That Adaptation Requires Accommodation or Modification**

For standards that the team decides must be adapted for the student, the next step is to determine whether that adaptation will take the form of *accommodation* or *modification*.

Adaptations that provide access to the general education curriculum but do not fundamentally alter the grade level standard are considered *accommodations* (Freedman, 2005). For example, a 4th grade student who has a learning disability in the area of reading may have audiotapes of social studies and science materials. This student also may take exams orally. Although the format for answering questions on exams is different in this case, the content of the questions and the substance of responses remains the same.

In subject areas where only accommodations are needed, students receiving special education should be assigned grades according to the same criteria as all other students in the

class, with no penalty for the accommodation. Similarly, a student with a learning disability who requires extra time to complete exams should be assigned a grade based on the content of his or her responses. The grade should not be lowered because of the time extension, which simply provides access—it does not alter the standard. At the same time, the grade also should not be raised based on effort, progress, or any other factor that does not reflect learning or achievement.

In contrast, some students receiving special education need adaptations that are more substantial than accommodations. For these students, some or all of the grade level standards may not be achievable during the academic year, and curricular *modifications* are required. A modification is an adaptation that fundamentally alters the grade level expectation (Freedman, 2005). An IEP team may conclude, for instance, that for this academic year, the 4th grade student from the above example will not be able to achieve some of the 4th grade language arts standards, such as the ability to recognize and use grade level vocabulary in text. The team must then determine a more appropriate, lower standard for the IEP. This student will thus have both accommodations and curricular modifications.

The IEP team decides the need for accommodations or modifications for each standard. Some students may have only accommodations; others will have only modifications. Many students will require a combination of accommodations for some standards and modifications for others. Although IEPs typically include both types of adaptations, IEP teams may not have historically recorded these differently. For grading and reporting purposes in a standards-based environment, however, this distinction is necessary.

#### **Step 4: If Modification Is Required, Develop an Appropriate Modified Standard**

For the 4th-grade student in the example above, communicating failure on a grade level language arts standard provides no meaningful information about the student's current level of

performance or achievement. The IEP team must, therefore, determine a modified standard that this student will be able to achieve with appropriate special education services. Modified standards should be clearly linked to the grade level standard and recorded on the IEP as an annual goal. So instead of “recognize and use 4th-grade vocabulary words in text,” a more appropriate standard might be to “recognize and use 2nd-grade vocabulary words in text.” The student should then be graded based on performance on this modified standard, not failure to meet the defined grade level standard.

Another example would be a 6th-grade student with significant cognitive impairment who is working toward lower grade level vocabulary standards. The grades or marks for this student should be based on the modified language arts standards, not the grade level standards. Assessing and reporting achievement on grade level standards that the IEP team has already agreed are unattainable for this student at this time would be meaningless and, arguably, illegal.

**Step 5: Assign a Grade or Mark Based on the Modified Standard and Note on the Report Card Which Standards Have Been Modified**

By providing information on students' specific achievements, separate from indicators of effort and progress, and then clearly communicating the meaning of each grade assigned, educators can offer families much better information about children's learning success (Guskey, 2002). If some or all of the grades for achievement are based on modified standards, then the reporting system must include additional information to ensure that families understand that their children's success is based on work appropriate for their development level, not their assigned grade level. To base grades or marks on modified standards without communicating what was truly measured is no more meaningful or fair than giving failing grades based on grade level standards. Schools might use a superscript letter or place an asterisk beside the report card grades

or marks for those standards that are modified. The accompanying footnote might then state, “Based on modified standards” and direct the reader to the standards on which the grade was based.

Understanding that modifications were provided is important to anyone trying to interpret the grade or mark, including families, potential employers, and even postsecondary institutions. By law, however, the notation on the transcript must not in any way identify the student as receiving special education services or as receiving accommodations. Noting that modifications were provided is legal, but only if modifications are available to any student who needs them, regardless of special education eligibility.

Furthermore, a footnote to the notation for a modified standard can use the word *modified*, but phrases such as *special education goals* or *IEP goals* would be considered a violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II). When *modified* is used, an accompanying report might then include the IEP goals or a narrative describing the details of the IEP.

Although federal legislation does not explicitly prohibit schools from making notations of special education status in a report card, provided that these are only shared with families, it discourages the practice for two reasons. First, the special education status of a student is not needed to interpret grades in a standards-based environment. And second, families of students who receive special education services already know their children have disabilities or developmental delays. Reminding them of this with each report card is unnecessary.

### **Determine the Need for Additional Goals**

One additional factor needs to be considered when assigning grades to students with special needs in a standards-based environment. Some students receiving special education may

have additional IEP goals that are pertinent to the student's development, but extend beyond the general education curriculum. A student with Pervasive Developmental Delay, for example, may have IEP goals related to social-emotional development. A goal such as “initiate and maintain interaction with peers,” may be particularly important for this student. Although such goals may not be included on the general report card, monitoring and reporting on these goals remain important. To do so, schools should continue to provide this information on a regular basis through a report card supplement. This will allow families and others on the IEP team to make appropriate decisions based on all aspects the child's progress and achievement in school (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

Educators at all levels today need clear and specific guidance in developing grading policies and practices for students with disabilities who are included in general education classes. Reporting separately on product, process, and progress learning goals and situating product or achievement grades within the context of accommodations and modifications offers a promising alternative to adapted grading within a standards-based environment. The IEP then can serve to document the curricular accommodations and modifications made for students who receive special education. After considering the accommodation and modification needs of students, IEP teams can determine whether or not each student should be held to grade level standards or modified standards.

If the IEP team decides to modify particular standards that they judge to be inappropriate for the student, then no further grading adaptations are needed. Product or achievement grades need not be adjusted by considering effort, work habits, progress, or other behaviors. These process and progress indicators may remain an important part of grading and reporting, but they

are kept separate from indicators of students' achievement of specific learning standards. By reporting product, progress, and process goals separately, inaccurate grades based on an arbitrary mix of factors can be eliminated. As a result, students with disabilities and their families can have information that they are able to interpret accurately and use effectively.

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