

## Introduction

Windham Middle School is engaged in a process of renewal and refocus designed to raise the level of achievement for all students. After several years of thinking and planning, our school is embarking on a journey that will result in higher student achievement, greater clarity of expectations, and clearer insight into student progress.

We refer to this new way of doing business as “standards-based.” It is a simple idea with powerful implications for the way students are taught and how they learn. In a nutshell, “standards-based” means that:

- The curriculum in every class will continue to be carefully aligned with the Maine Learning Results. While each teacher will still instruct in a way that meets the needs of their class, all learning activities will be designed to move students toward mastery of the specific standards that the State of Maine has set for all students in each subject.
- Teachers will agree on what “mastery” looks like for the subjects they teach, and all students will take assessments designed to demonstrate their proficiency.
- Students will have a clear understanding of the targets they are to meet, and what it will take to meet them.
- Parents will receive a report three times each year that will list the standards taught and their child’s level of mastery of that standard – “does not meet,” “partially meets,” “meets,” or “exceeds.” No longer will *one letter of the alphabet standing alone on a report card* be used to describe their child’s unique strengths and challenges.
- Standards will be consistent in each subject, grades 6, 7, and 8.

Why these changes now?

In 1997, the State of Maine (along with nearly all other states) adopted a set of Learning Results that for the first time spelled out clearly what students are expected to know and be able to do in the various subjects in each grade. (To read these standards, visit <http://www.state.me.us/education/lres/lres.htm>.) Teachers at Windham Middle School have carefully aligned what they teach with these state standards. State assessments, which are also aligned with the state standards and are given to all students, measure how well our students are doing.

Fast-forward ten years. In the spring of 2007, the Windham School Committee began a conversation about grading practices at Windham Middle School. The Committee had noticed that the Honor Roll published in the local paper was quite lengthy and was curious about whether these Honor Roll students were also doing well on the Maine Educational Assessment. Did our school’s teaching, learning, and grading practices line up with state expectations? The conversation provided a revealing look at how teachers teach and grade, and how we provide feedback to students and parents.

Out of this report came a suggestion that we form a grading practices committee that would look at all aspects of grading and reporting. How could we provide more useful and consistent information to students and parents and (more importantly) how could we make sure that our students are meeting the state standards?

As a result of these conversations, we are changing how we teach, how students learn, and how we report student progress. Your student's report card will reflect these changes.

For many years, students have received report cards with traditional letter grades. But what do those grades really mean? We can probably agree that an "A" means that a student is doing well, a "B" means they are doing fine, a "C" is OK, and anything below that is not good! We all love seeing "A's" on those report cards, but an "A" doesn't tell you anything about what your child learned during the grading period or his areas of strength and challenge.

To further complicate matters, different teachers often have different ways to determine grades. For example, one teacher may count homework and class participation as a certain percentage of the final grade, another teacher may not. Tests and quizzes usually have different weights. Behavior and effort may or may not be figured in. Students, who travel from classroom to classroom several times in the course of the day, may have been confused about how their grades are determined.

Windham Middle School's grade report is organized by standards and learning targets. The report tells parents exactly what skills their child has worked on during the grading period, and whether the child met the standard, partially met the standard, or exceeded the standard. Teachers have worked together to develop a common understanding of what students must do to meet or exceed the standards, so grading is consistent from teacher to teacher. Factors which impact achievement, such as behavior, effort, homework are important and will be reported as well, but separately -- the focus is on the student's level of achievement as measured against a clear and consistent standard.

So, how will our school change? In several important ways:

- Learning is a progression of experiences. Student learning and growth takes time, and so does thoughtful evaluation. Instead of dividing our year into quarters, we will move to a trimester schedule, so that teachers will have a longer period of time in which to gather evidence and assess progress (this will also be consistent with the K-5 schedule in Windham). The old averaged grades will no longer exist. Coaches do not penalize players for mistakes made during practice; only the score at the end of the game "counts." Similarly, students will not be penalized for the mistakes and misunderstandings that are a necessary part of learning. We'll encourage them to take risks fearlessly!
- But, students will still be held accountable for demonstrating, at the end of a unit of learning, that they have mastered the targeted standards. Parents will know exactly what the targets are -- and if their child is hitting them.

We'll measure student mastery through a series of carefully-designed common assessments given to all students at appropriate times.

Windham Middle School is not alone in this move. All across the State, schools are aligning what they teach with the state standards and evaluating students accordingly. And it isn't just middle or elementary schools – Governor Baldacci has asked that all Maine high schools begin using the state standards as the criteria for granting diplomas. (For more information, see <http://www.maine.gov/education/diploma/finalreport.pdf>.)

The most successful schools are those with high expectations and clear standards. The most successful students are those with clear understandings of the targets they are expected to hit. By moving to a standards-based approach to teaching, learning, and evaluating, we will realize our vision of “success for all.”

## Definition of Terms

Let's begin by defining a few terms that you are likely to encounter:

1. **Academic standards** – brief statements that describe what a student should know and be able to do in a particular subject in each grade. These have been developed by the State of Maine, and all schools must make sure that students master them. Some may extend over an entire school year; others may be shorter. Here are two examples:

*Reading Standard: Grades 6-8*

*Students read to comprehend, interpret, analyze and evaluate literary and expository texts by using a variety of strategies.*

*Math Standard: Grades 6-8*

*Students make measurements and collect, display, evaluate, analyze and compute data.*

2. **Learning targets** -- more specific statements that describe what students are expected to know and be able to do after successfully completing a unit of study. Teachers work collaboratively with grade level colleagues as well as across the span of grades to break down standards into specific learning targets or skills needed to show proficiency at a specific point in time. Here are two examples:

### **Grade 6 Reading Learning Targets:**

- *Students will use a range of before, during and after reading strategies to comprehend what is read*
- *Students will determine the meaning of unknown words by using a variety of strategies*
- *Students will demonstrate comprehension by summarizing and making generalizations of whole texts, parts of texts and across texts.*

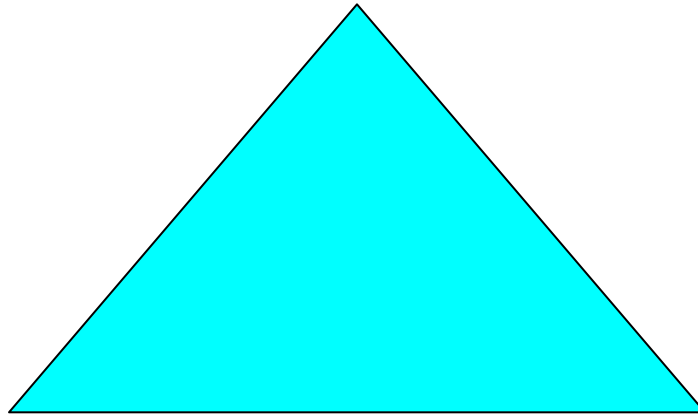
### **Grade 6 Data Learning Targets:**

- *Students will read and interpret pie charts*
- *Students will find and compare the mean, median, mode and range for sets of data.*

- 3. Rubrics** -- Scoring guides which are developed by the teachers or with the involvement of students. Rubrics provide very specific descriptions of what the learning looks like. Students know exactly what standard and learning targets are being evaluated, as well as what it looks like to be proficient, or meet the standard. The terms Exceeds, Meets, Partially Meets and Does Not Meet are used on most rubrics for common assessments, as well as some classroom assessments. Rubrics provide students with feedback on their progress toward meeting a standard.
- 4. Evidence** – All of the information we have about student achievement. Teachers may look at many kinds of evidence to determine if students have mastered the standards. That evidence may include products such as written work, classroom presentations and performances; conversations with the student; and observations of student understanding.

**products**

worksheets, pre-tests, post-tests,  
writing assignments, research papers  
brochures, etc.



**conversations**

student conferences, feedback  
sessions, after school sessions,  
journals, reflection sheets, etc.

**observations of process**

oral presentations,  
class participation,  
completing lab work, etc.

Source: Anne Davies, *Making Classroom Assessment Work*

More information on using evidence in standards-based classrooms can be found at the following website:

[http://www.prsd.ab.ca/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=163&Itemid=9](http://www.prsd.ab.ca/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=163&Itemid=9) .

5. **Formative assessments** – These are tests, quizzes, reading checks, or other methods that a teacher might use during a unit of study to gauge if students are on track to

master a standard. They are not used to judge whether a student has mastered a standard and do not “count” on the final grade report. They are important because they will help teachers see trends in student achievement and adjust instruction to meet student needs.

6. **Summative Assessments** – These are the opportunities that students are given at the end of a unit to show that they have mastered the standard. A summative assessment might look like a traditional test, or it may be a performance, a demonstration, or some other kind of evidence.

In a standards-based system, students receive timely descriptive feedback regarding what they are doing well, and what they need to be doing to improve their work for it to be proficient or better. Students have multiple opportunities within a trimester to demonstrate proficiency with specific learning targets or standard, and are expected to revise and edit work that is less than proficient. Students may not meet standards at the same time or in the same way. Teachers will use a variety of assessment methods that will allow all children the chance to succeed.

Judgments are made by teachers looking at a variety of assessment data over time to see patterns and trends in learning, not by a single score or the averaging of grades.

Students who struggle to meet standards can be provided with programming to support their learning needs.

## **Factors that Influence Student Achievement**

Looking at student learning compared to a standard gives only a partial view of that student's whole learning experience; the standards based system of reporting is about looking at a broader picture of student learning. We are interested in the various factors that influence student achievement -- factors which include work habits, conduct, effort, and ability to apply learning. The traditional system of grading often gives priority to the final product, a letter grade. Our new system of grading will give a more detailed view of the student's learning. If a student meets a standard, but does not put forth much effort in order to do so, we will report that. There are students who should be exceeding standards, but their own process hinders them.

The Maine Learning Results is our guiding document for educating our students. The development of strong work habits, effective communication skills, and a concern for quality are just as important as reading, writing and arithmetic. These qualities are referred to the “Guiding Principles” and can be accessed at the following website:

<http://www.state.me.us/education/lres/gp.htm> .

So, what are the key factors that influence learning? We all are familiar with the traditional concept of how effort and behavior relates to learning, but a successful learning experience goes beyond these dimensions. Meaningful learning includes how a student conducts themselves in the classroom, how they extend their learning with preparation (i.e. complete class work and homework diligently), and how well they apply the standards they have learned to other situations both in and out of the classroom.

There are three main categories that we have considered to be important for success in the classroom and in life. They are **extended learning, effort and personal conduct**.

- A student's mark in the **extended learning** category will let parents know how well a student is doing completing independent work, such as homework and class work, how well they apply concepts to a variety of situations and how well they make personal connections to their learning.
- **Effort** is a category that involves students paying attention in class, listening to both the teacher and their peers, being motivated to continue to work hard even when the tasks are difficult, following directions and being actively engaged in the learning process.
- The category we are referring to as **personal conduct** will be a report on how well a student cooperates with both teachers and peers, how respectful they are of others and of property, how well they manage themselves in the school environment and how well they do their part as a citizen of the school.

## **Motivation for Learning, Without the Promise and Threat of Letter Grades!**

Motivation is key to learning, and is often the factor that determines how well a student does in meeting standards. As educators, we're concerned with two kinds of motivation – **external** (which comes from the outside, such as paying students for grades or listing honor roll students' names in the paper), and **internal** (the satisfaction which students feels from trying their best and succeeding). A well-established body of research into human behavior supports

our belief that internal motivation is stronger than external. Therefore, it is our goal to shift the focus to motivating students by having them be truly engaged in their learning rather than just concerned about a number or letter that is received at the end of a quarter.

## **Research Findings and How We Will Apply Them**

### **SCORE – goals and needs**

Researchers Richard Strong, Harvey Silver and Amy Robinson wrote an article entitled “What do Students Want (and What Really Motivates Them)?” It can be found at <http://www.middleweb.com/StdntMotv.html> . Strong and his colleagues participated in a research project in which they determined that students (and adults) who are engaged in their learning are driven by these four essential goals:

**S** – success ( the need all of us have as human beings to master a subject)

**C** – curiosity ( the need we all have to understand)

**O** – originality ( the need for self-expression and creativity)

**R** - relationship (the need for involvement with others)

**E** – energy – The four goals give students the energy they need for a complete and productive life.

All of these goals are intrinsic motivators. Grades and scores are considered to be extrinsic motivators and have limited value in the classroom. The goal becomes the prize or grade rather than the learning. Here are a couple of links to online resources that we used in our research:

“Failure of Extrinsic Motivation” –

<http://www.engines4ed.org/hyperbook/nodes/NODE-148-pg.html>

“The Impact of Extrinsic Motivation” – the results of a study on the effect of extrinsic motivators and how they actually hindered learning.

<http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Motivation004.htm>

### **Classroom Practices**

In order to provide the support that students need to be motivated intrinsically to meet standards, we must give students all they need to be successful. As Strong states, “Students want and need work that enables them to demonstrate and improve their sense of themselves as competent and successful human beings. This is the drive toward mastery.” In order to provide

this type of work, teachers will clearly articulate the standards that students are expected to master (through rubrics, verbal instruction and written instruction), they will clearly teach and model the skills students need to experience success, they will give students multiple opportunities to succeed and they will help students see success as a valuable aspect of their personalities. “Failure” will no longer be a part of our vocabulary. If a student is not meeting the standards, teachers will intervene through a variety of measures, such as after school tutoring, small group work, providing help from another staff member or from a peer, re-teaching and alternative assessments. The goal is students’ learning, rather than assigning students’ grades.

### **Next Steps**

The standards-based approach to teaching, learning, assessing, and reporting student progress will be implemented in grades 6 and 7 during the 2009-2010 school year, and will expand to include grade 8 the following year. This move will not only better support student learning, it will also help Windham students prepare for Maine’s new standards-based diploma which will first be required of the Class of 2017.

More information will be shared as we begin to implement this approach. In the meantime, if you have any questions about anything you have read here, or how standards-based education will affect your student, please call Mr. Shortsleeve at 892-1820.