

CHAPTER 1

Learn From Failures

Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to error that counts.

—Nikki Giovanni

To find examples of districts or schools that failed in their efforts to reform grading and reporting, you don't have to look far. As described in the introduction, the road to grading reform is cluttered with the wreckage of those who took on the challenge and were soundly defeated in their efforts (Rado, 2016; St. George, 2017).

The leaders of these failed attempts—committed educators convinced they were doing the right thing—intended to improve grading and reporting with new policies and practices that benefit students and enhance communication with families. Most sought advice from prominent consultants who offered specific guidance on implementation. And all believed that changing grading and reporting was their professional responsibility.

But often, shortly after initiating the change, these reform leaders encountered unanticipated problems and organized resistance. When attempts to address the problems and calm the resistance failed, many of these leaders were forced to abandon their efforts. The districts and schools they led then returned to traditional grading and reporting methods, leaving reform leaders' credibility in doubt and reliance on

Portions of this chapter appear in "Class Rank Weighs Down True Learning" (Guskey, 2014a) and "Standards-Based Learning: Why Do Educators Make It So Complex?" (Guskey, 2016b).

traditions more firmly entrenched than ever (Field, 2019; Moody, 2018). In a few instances, the reform efforts so damaged the good standing of these leaders that they lost their jobs and had to move to another district or retire from the profession (Brochu, 2013; Cregan, 2013).

To succeed in grading and reporting reforms, we need to understand why these particular efforts failed. What did these districts and schools do or not do that led to their downfall? And more important, what could they have done differently that would have given them a better chance at success? This chapter considers how districts typically go about reforming grading and reporting practices, what lessons we can learn from efforts that failed, and how we can more successfully implement grading and reporting reforms.

How Most Districts Approach Grading and Reporting Reform

Many districts and schools approach grading and reporting reform in similar ways, but most of those approaches are unsuccessful.

Most begin by appointing a report card committee to address the many problems different stakeholder groups voice regarding grading and reporting. Teachers, building leaders, district administrators, and occasionally a few parents typically make up this committee. In some instances, student representatives are included as well.

At the first committee meeting, members discuss their dissatisfaction with the current report card. Typically, they don't like its structure and believe it offers inadequate information about students' learning progress in school. They acknowledge the constraints imposed by the computerized grading program the district purchased, and they wish it was more flexible. They are especially upset that district leaders did not recognize these limitations before investing such a large sum of money in the program.

After discussing what they don't like, a few committee members are assigned the task of searching the internet for examples of report cards that other districts or schools have developed. After all, why go to the trouble of creating an entirely new form if someone else has already developed something useful and effective? These members dutifully conduct their search and assemble a collection of report cards used in

other districts. They then present their collection of examples to the other committee members for review.

Committee members study the assorted examples and discuss what they like and don't like about each. Based on their discussion, they develop a hybrid report card, combining the elements they favor from the examples. They discuss and revise their hybrid report card and then present it to district and building leaders, who offer their input. After another round of revisions, they present the new report card to the faculty, along with plans for implementation.

What committee members don't realize throughout this process is that nearly every example report card they gathered in their internet search was developed in exactly this same way. Districts and schools typically don't base their forms on careful examination of evidence about what works in grading and reporting. Nor do they develop them based on pilot versions and trials that include surveys or interviews with various stakeholders (for example, parents, students, teachers, and school leaders). This search-adapt-implement process, therefore, doesn't result in shared knowledge and expanded expertise. Instead, it often leads to shared naiveté or, in the worst cases, shared ignorance.

Typical but Unsuccessful Steps in Grading and Reporting Reform

1. Appoint a report card committee.
2. The committee meets to discuss problems and concerns.
3. Selected committee members search the internet for examples of report cards from other districts or schools.
4. Committee members review examples, choose what they like, and combine elements to create a "hybrid" report card.
5. Committee members present their work to fellow teachers and make plans for implementation.

What We Can Learn From This Approach

We can learn two important lessons from the lack of success districts and schools have had with this approach.

1. **Don't initiate reforms in grading and reporting with the report card. First, decide the *what* and the *why*, and**

then decide the *how*: Because of their vital role in communicating information about students' learning to parents and families, report cards must be considered in the reform process. But that's not the place to start. Before deciding *how* to report, you must first decide *what* information is most important to report and *why* you want to report it. The following sections of this chapter describe the many important decisions schools and districts need to make and critical issues they must address *before* considering the structure and content of the report card.

2. **Don't guide reform of any aspect of grading and reporting with a haphazard internet search. Use substantiated evidence from quality research:** With rare exceptions, anyone with an idea about anything can post their idea on the internet. Few critical checks exist to confirm the validity or authenticity of information found on the internet. Reforms in grading and reporting must be guided instead by quality research studies, well-designed evaluation reports, or substantiated evidence gathered from verifiably successful programs. Grading and reporting are too important and the consequences far too serious for reforms to be guided by guesswork, opinions, and speculation.

To succeed in grading and reporting reform, education leaders need to find a better approach. They need to be much more thoughtful about the process and proceed with the same judicious inquiry skills we encourage students to develop. Specifically, their planning efforts must be purposeful, systemic, informed, and strategic.

How to Learn From Mistakes

The following story was posted on a grading social media site. It describes one school district's unsuccessful attempt to revise grading and reporting. The name of the person who posted the story and the district name are omitted to protect their anonymity. The story has also been paraphrased.

This kind of heartbreaking tale is far too common. This district clearly had dedicated educators at all levels who supported reform efforts. They

A Sad but Not Uncommon Story

Our district had been trying to transition to standards-based grading. We started implementation with high school freshmen. The entire district followed the next school year. We experienced significant resistance from parents the first couple of years, but that eventually settled as students adjusted and most of the complaining stopped. In my opinion, however, we did not provide our faculty with the needed professional development. Teachers were simply given a book by a prominent consultant and asked to read it. We had a handful of presenters on standards-based grading and formed a couple of committees to guide implementation at each school level. Although a few teachers took the time to read the book, most never opened it. Most of our teachers had little understanding of standards-based learning, and few bought into standards-based grading.

Three new superintendents and four high school principals later, coupled with a great deal of teacher turnover, standards-based learning and standards-based grading have become a thing of the past in our district. It's both sad and frustrating for those of us who worked hard to fully make the transition to standards-based grading. None of us has the desire or energy to try again.

read books on grading and reporting reform and invited several consultants to the district to share ideas and offer advice on needed change. They developed a gradual approach to implementation in order to ease the transition to new grading and reporting methods. Yet despite their planning and hard work, the result was a frustrating experience for all.

No one reason accounts for failures such as this in grading and reporting reform efforts. Nevertheless, a quick review of troubled programs and failed efforts reveals that most made the same or quite similar mistakes. In addition, in nearly every case, school and district leaders could have anticipated and avoided these mistakes. Taking the following steps will help schools and districts avoid these reform-killing mistakes. If thoughtfully planned and carefully executed, these steps can dramatically increase the likelihood of success in any grading and reporting reform initiative.

Keys to Successful Grading and Reporting Reform

1. Keep the process simple.
2. Complete tasks in order.
3. Address *why* before *what*.
4. Understand the importance of tradition.
5. Anticipate opposition.

can confound implementation efforts and often results in the demise of potentially good ideas. A classic example is what often happens when educators involved in grading reform move toward standards-based learning.

"Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."
—Charles Mingus

Curriculum

Standards-based learning requires educators to *articulate clear learning goals that identify what students should learn (content) and be able to do (cognitive behaviors)*. Effective learning goals always include both of these components (Guskey, 2016b). In other words, you can't have curriculum content without an accompanying description of what students are expected to do with it. Separating content from process within a curriculum makes no sense.

For example, should students simply know and be able to recall the content? Or should they comprehend and understand it in sufficient depth to explain it in their own words? Should they be able to apply

Keep the Process Simple

Educators often take simple ideas and make them inexplicably complicated. Granted, there are always subtleties and nuances in education related to the varied contexts in which teaching and learning occur. But adding complexity to simple ideas typically yields confusion rather than clarity. It

The simple idea of standards-based learning is to *ensure transparency in all elements of the teaching and learning process: curriculum, instruction, assessment, and grading and reporting*. This means that each of these elements must be carefully described, completely transparent, and clearly understood by everyone involved: teachers, students, parents, school leaders, and board members. There can be no exceptions and no excuses.

it or transfer it to a new and different context? Once articulated, these goals should be shared so they become well known by everyone involved: students, families, teachers, school leaders, and community members.

Typically, we organize learning goals in grade levels at the elementary level and in courses at the secondary level. But organizational structures associated with continuous progress, learning progressions, individualized programs, or personalized learning could be equally valid.

Clear learning goals bring meaning to discussions about curriculum rigor, college and career readiness, and global citizenship. They clarify the difference between memorizing factual information and developing enduring understandings. An emphasis on *essential questions* or *power standards* similarly shifts the focus to deeper, more complex, and higher-level cognitive skills.

Instruction

Educators implementing standards-based learning must develop instructional activities that help *all* students achieve those learning goals. Here, discussions of students' entry-level skills, interests, and cultural differences; learning modalities; differentiated instruction; project-based learning; cooperative learning; online learning opportunities; flipped classrooms; and alternative forms of instruction become vitally important.

Assessment

Standards-based educators must *identify what evidence best reflects students' achievement of those learning goals*. This integrates important issues related to formative and summative assessments, assessments *for* and *of* learning, multiple ways for students to demonstrate mastery, authentic and performance-based assessments, meaningful feedback, and student self-regulation.

Grading and Reporting

Finally, standards-based learning requires educators to *use grading and reporting strategies that meaningfully communicate students' achievement of those learning goals*. This brings attention to gradebook, report card, and transcript design; multiple grades reflecting product, process, and progress criteria; reporting on citizenship, work habits, social and

emotional learning, and other noncognitive skills; and grading and reporting policies and practices.

Standards-based learning simply requires transparency and consistency in these elements. In other words, we must have clarity and reliability in what we teach, how we teach it, how we evaluate student learning, and how we report students' learning progress.

"Simplicity is complex. It's never simple to keep things simple. Simple solutions require the most advanced thinking."

—Richie Norton

Given this simple purpose of transparency, on what basis would anyone oppose standards-based learning? Admittedly, not everyone agrees on what content students most need to learn and what skills they should develop. Differences abound in our education philosophies and what we most value as a society. But once we make these decisions, would anyone suggest that we keep these decisions

secret from students and their families? Does anyone think we should not teach students what we consider most important for them to learn or not assess students based on what they were taught? Would anyone advocate a reporting system that fails to accurately inform parents and families of what students have learned? Of course not! This defining characteristic of standards-based learning is essential to effective teaching and learning at any level and in any context (Guskey, 2016b).

The more complicated we make the simple process of standards-based learning, the easier it is to lose track of the primary and indispensable importance of transparency in these essential elements. Establishing and maintaining transparency in these elements must be kept at the center of this important work. It is vital to success.

Complete Tasks in Order

Occasionally, reformers make the mistake of not addressing the essential elements of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and reporting in order. As discussed earlier, problems always arise when educators change grading practices or the report card and move ahead with standards-based reporting without first addressing curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This can lead to frustration, inconsistent implementation, and eventual abandonment of the entire reform process. We must always address issues regarding what we teach, how we teach it, and how we

assess learning *before* we consider how best to grade and report student learning progress.

Implementing standards-based grading without first addressing these other elements is like trying to put the roof on a house before constructing the foundation and building the walls. We lose the central purpose of transparency in reporting if we do not have clarity on what we are being transparent about.

Simplifying our focus also means putting off other issues until we establish purpose and transparency in these essential elements. Appropriate and effective homework policies, multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery or redo assessments, common formative assessments, the consequences for not turning in assignments on time, and so on are all important issues. But they are *not essential elements of standards-based learning*. Taking on all these issues at the beginning of the reform process seriously complicates implementation. It also drastically increases the magnitude of change required for most teachers. If we establish purpose and transparency first, discussions of these other issues will naturally evolve and can be dealt with in a more focused and decisive way.

Standards-based learning is a simple idea. Complexity comes in its implementation. To successfully implement standards-based learning requires that we keep the simple purpose of transparency in mind and do things in order while adapting to the unique and complex contextual characteristics of different schools and classrooms. Implementation efforts will succeed not by making this simple idea more complex but by finding new and better ways to adapt and apply the idea in widely varied and highly diverse school settings (Guskey, 2016b).

Address Why Before What

As previously discussed, many attempts to reform grading and reporting begin by revising the report card. Reformers start by changing what they include on the report card, the report card's structure, how they determine grades, and numerous other policies related to report card grades. Some educators work with the developer of their computerized

"Have a bias toward action—let's see something happen now. You can break that big plan into small steps and take the first step right away."

—Indira Gandhi

grading program to make specific adaptations. Others launch organized efforts to explain the planned changes to various stakeholder groups, including students, teachers, parents and families, administrators, board members, and community leaders.

These committed educators fail to recognize, however, that stakeholders' initial concerns are not so much about *what* is changing but about *why* it needs to change. Stakeholders don't see the grading- or reporting-related problems that reformers may consider obvious. They don't understand, for example, the reporting complications associated with percentage grades, plus and minus grades, class rank, the use of a single grade to describe students' performance, or the misguided use of mathematical algorithms to calculate grades (Guskey, 2015). Stakeholders experienced all these aspects of grading when they were in school. They see little reason to change something that they know and believe has always worked well.

For this reason, explanations of reform initiatives must always begin with *why* rather than *what*. In challenging percentage grades, for example, reformers must start by explaining how difficult teachers find it to reliably apply a grading scale that includes 101 discrete levels of performance, two-thirds of which denote levels of failure (Guskey, 2009, 2013; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Discussions of class rank should begin with descriptions of the impact this process has on students and how, in many instances, it actually hurts students' chances of admission to highly selective colleges and universities (Bocella, 2016).

In explaining the shift to multiple grades, reformers should describe how combining aspects of achievement, behavior, responsibility, and effort into a single grade makes the grade impossible to interpret and diminishes the value of grades in efforts to help students improve (Guskey, 2018a). To move away from the use of mathematical algorithms in determining students' grades, educators must show parents examples of how these mindless calculations often falsely depict what students have learned and are able to do (Guskey & Jung, 2016; Rose, 2016).

Stakeholders in the grading and reporting process are generally reasonable people who sincerely want what is best for students. They hang on to traditions because they see nothing wrong with them. Providing these different stakeholder groups with a sound rationale for change, a

thorough explanation of *why* the change is important, and specific evidence to support the change can drastically improve their openness to and acceptance of change.

Understand the Importance of Tradition

Traditions have an important role in every society. They are the way we transmit customs, beliefs, or ways of acting from one generation to the next. All our traditions have some origin in the past, and they provide a sense of stability and consistency as we move forward in time. Traditions give us security in a world filled with change and uncertainty. But maintaining traditions that have long outlived their purpose and usefulness can also stifle progress.

As discussed in the introduction, many grading policies and practices are based more on tradition rather than evidence of effectiveness. Educators do this not because they know it works well but simply because "we've always done it that way." Changing the way we grade and report student learning means challenging these traditions with the knowledge and confidence that we can do better. But challenging time-honored traditions also means disrupting the security those traditions provide. It means pushing people away from something they find comfortable and familiar and toward a place of uncertainty and anxiety.

Some reform leaders and consultants try to do this through confrontation. They describe these long-held traditions in grading as evil and indefensible. To these reform advocates and consultants, changing such traditions is not just the duty of responsible educators—it is a moral imperative.

But confrontation rarely succeeds. Instead, it causes discussions of change to degenerate into battles of opposing opinions that divert attention and diminish reform efforts. Evidence indicates that to debate another's opinions often serves only to deepen the other's attachment to those opinions (Maeli, 2016). Thus, even when confrontation leads to change, that change tends to be short-lived. It lasts only as long as it takes for opponents of the change to get organized, gather support, and

"It is necessary for us to learn from others' mistakes. You will not live long enough to make them all yourself."
—Hyman G. Rickover

press those in charge to return to the traditional policies and practices they believe to be tried, true, and still valuable.

To succeed in reform efforts, leaders must be sensitive to the loss of security, the intense anxiety, and the extreme discomfort that accom-

*"Tradition becomes
our security, and when
the mind is secure,
it is in decay."*

—Jiddu Krishnamurti

pany abandoning established traditions. They must clearly understand the historical importance of these traditions and why educators have maintained them despite the lack of substantiating evidence. Most important, leaders must be ready to offer new, evidence-based traditions to take their place.

Consider, for example, the earlier discussion about challenging the traditions of calculating class rank and selecting the class valedictorian (Guskey, 2014a). In most high schools throughout North America, graduating students are ranked according to their cumulative grade point average, or GPA. Many high school educators feel compelled to rank-order graduating students because selective colleges and universities require this information as part of the application process. But while those colleges and universities might have required that information in the past, that requirement is not nearly as prevalent today.

A survey by Eric Hoover (2012) found that only 19 percent of colleges and universities say class rank has considerable importance in the application process, and since then that percentage has dropped even further since 2012 (O'Brien, 2014). Most admissions officers actually express serious skepticism about the meaningfulness of class rank (McKibben, 2017). Schools maintain the practice of calculating class rank primarily because it is a long-held tradition.

Using class rank to select the class valedictorian is also a prevalent tradition in U.S. high schools. This tradition is particularly ironic because the term *valuedictorian* has nothing to do with academic achievement. It comes from the Latin *vale dicere*, which means "to say farewell" (Wikipedia, 2019). It is the individual selected from the graduating class to deliver a farewell address at the commencement ceremony called a *valuedictory*.

Suppose we wanted to challenge these traditions of class rank and class valedictorian selection. First, we would need to address why we want to do this. What is wrong with recognizing academic excellence?

Why not honor those students who work hard and make earning high grades a priority? Doesn't this process motivate students to do their best? And how else would you select the class valedictorian?

There is nothing wrong, of course, with recognizing excellent academic performance. All educators champion the idea of acknowledging students' outstanding scholastic achievements. Educators also want to provide students with incentives to work hard and do their very best. But ranking students based on their cumulative GPA and using that ranking to determine the class valedictorian pits students against each other to attain that singular distinction. The process often results in aggressive and sometimes bitter competition among high-achieving students to be that top-ranked individual. Gaining the honor requires not simply becoming a high achiever; it requires outdoing everyone else in the class. And sometimes the difference among these top-achieving students is as little as one-hundred-thousandth of a decimal point in their weighted GPA. For one student's poignant portrayal of this process, see the YouTube video "Valedictorian Shocks World With Brutally Honest Graduation Speech" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5uqNhfnHL8; Tolley, 2016), which has had more than six million views.

Some high schools address this issue by identifying the ten top-ranked students in the class, rather than picking a single top-ranked individual. But while this policy may ease the tension among those ten students, it does little for the student ranked eleventh. Plus the choice of ten is quite arbitrary. Why not twelve? Or twenty? Or the top 10 percent so the number varies depending on class enrollment? Regardless of the number or percentage chosen, the result is the same. This policy defines excellence not in terms of challenging and rigorous learning criteria but in terms of a student's relative standing among classmates (Guskey, 2014a).

*"The less there is to
justify a traditional
custom, the harder
it is to get rid of it."*

—Mark Twain

To successfully challenge this tradition and change the system, we need to have another system to take its place. The criterion-based Latin system most colleges and universities use to honor high-achieving students, for example, is a useful alternative to the competitive ranking system. At these institutions, students graduate *cum laude* (with honor),

magna cum laude (with great honor), and *summa cum laude* (with highest honor). Schools award such status based on students' cumulative GPAs, typically 3.50–3.74 for *cum laude*, 3.75–3.99 for *magna cum laude*, and 4.0 for *summa cum laude*.

In turn, we could adopt the procedures that colleges and universities use for selecting the student commencement speaker or valedictorian (Guskey, 2011). Depending on the institution, high-achieving college or university graduates might vote to determine who will represent them as valedictorian at the commencement ceremony. In some cases, the entire graduating class nominates and then votes for the person who best represents the class ideals. Sometimes, the faculty appoint the valedictorian based on a merit system that takes into account not only grades but also involvement in meaningful service projects and extracurricular activities. At some institutions, students compete in an essay contest to give the valedictory speech, while at other schools, a committee composed of students and faculty nominates students for the honor (Guskey, 2014a).

Would a system like this work at the high school level? As described in *On Your Mark* (Guskey, 2015), it works at Wilson High School in Reading, Pennsylvania. Wilson High School made this change after hearing from past valedictorians that they felt victimized by the competition to maintain the highest GPA. Some students reported that it made high school a repressive, unpleasant experience. Under the changed policy, Wilson rewards students for academic achievement measured against rigorous standards of excellence instead of comparing them to their peers (Heesen, 2013). Both parents and students have had an overwhelmingly positive response to the change at Wilson High School. In describing the change, one high-achieving Wilson student said, "I feel that the new system puts the focus on your education instead of competing for a name" (Heesen, 2013). And who delivers the valedictory at the graduation ceremony? A committee made up of faculty members chooses that student, and any senior can audition. Redmond High School in Redmond, Oregon, has implemented a similar program (Tribune, 2013).

These schools succeeded in challenging long-held traditions because they focused on *why* issues first. They addressed stakeholders' concerns

and then implemented evidence-based alternatives that were better for students. They replaced a tradition that had long outlived its usefulness with a new tradition that has proven better for everyone involved. They were purposeful, systematic, informed, and strategic.

Anticipate Opposition

Educators typically make two major mistakes regarding opposition to their proposed grading and reporting reforms. First, they don't anticipate opposition. Based on what they've read and what charismatic consultants have told them, they believe everyone will recognize that they are doing the right thing. As a result, it surprises them when anyone doubts the value and reasonableness of their actions. Second, they view the opposition as antagonistic. They see those opposed to these changes as opponents of progress who are stuck in old ways of thinking and misguided about what is truly best for students.

Let's be clear about this: there will always be opposition. As described earlier, challenging long-held traditions evokes uncertainty and anxiety. It threatens the security we feel in things we have known and believed to work. It also goes against what we have experienced. Change is hard under any circumstances, and when it flies in the face of tradition, it is all the more difficult.

"We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. When the loyal opposition dies, I think the soul of America dies with it."

—Edward R. Murrow

But those who oppose reforms in grading and reporting are generally not antagonistic. They don't oppose the reform just because it means change. Their opposition stems from genuine care for students' well-being, especially when those students are their children (Franklin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016).

To succeed in reforming grading and reporting, therefore, educators must understand three things about those who may oppose the change.

1. **New reforms challenge a system that opponents know and believe they understand:** Grading and reporting have remained relatively unchanged since the early part of the 20th century. The grading policies and practices teachers currently use are much the same as teachers used when

most parents, board members, school leaders, and community members were in school. These stakeholders have personal experience with the current system, see nothing wrong with it, and don't understand why it is inadequate for students. They need to be convinced that change is even necessary before they can consider the specific reforms educators propose.

2. **Opponents not only know the traditional grading and reporting systems of the past but also often thrived within them:** In many cases, these individuals succeeded in school because they figured out the grading system and knew what they needed to do to earn high grades. They behaved well in class. They did their homework. They turned in assignments on time. They took advantage of every extra-credit opportunity their teachers offered. In other words, they learned the rules and played by those rules. They mastered the grading system, inadequate as it may have been, and feel well qualified to pass along their wisdom to others, especially their children. Phillip Jackson (1986) refers to this as a *presumption of shared identity bias* that reinforces the status quo. They believe that if the system worked for them, it will also work well for their children.

Educators who press for more meaningful and accurate grading and reporting must help these stakeholders understand that previous grading practices often miscommunicated actual school achievement. In fact, the same policies and practices that benefited them may have harmed other students, especially those who were less privileged and had fewer advantages. These stakeholders need to know that the proposed reforms will result in grades that more accurately reflect what students have learned and are able to do, rather than how well students abided by the teacher's rules and manipulated the grading system. They need to understand that grades are temporary markers of learning progress, not judgments of students as individuals. Most important, they must recognize that grading and reporting serve primarily

as a communication tool between teachers and families to guide and coordinate efforts to help all students succeed.

3. **Opponents of reform often fear the proposed changes will have a detrimental effect on their own children:** These individuals believe the reforms may alter their children's motivation to do well in school and their commitment to hard work. Sometimes, they believe the changes will put their children at a disadvantage when it comes to the college admissions process, earning scholarships, or getting the best jobs. In the absence of solid, confirming evidence, they are unwilling to accept reform leaders' opinions that these damaging effects will not occur, and they refuse to sacrifice their children's future and well-being for the sake of untested innovation.

To counter such concerns, reformers must be prepared to support proposed changes with verifiable evidence. They must offer specific research that investigates the effects of grading reforms on student motivation (Stan, 2012). They should review the results of evaluation reports that discuss college admissions officers' acceptance of new reporting forms (Achieve, 2014; Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Great Schools Partnership, 2018; Hanover Research, 2011; Riede, 2018). They should provide evidence from surveys of students, teachers, and parents regarding their satisfaction with current grading policies and practices (Guskey & Link, 2019c; Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011a). Most important, they should make plans to gather evidence from different stakeholder groups throughout the implementation process and use that evidence to guide any adaptations or revisions that may be needed to improve results.

No reform in education goes forward without some level of opposition. In many instances, however, we can anticipate that opposition. With grading and reporting reforms, we can anticipate that opposition will come from concerned stakeholders, especially parents and families who sincerely want what is best for their children. They simply are not yet convinced the advocated reforms are necessarily better, especially when they run counter to well-established traditions.

We cannot ignore such opposition. We also can't address it through argument or confrontation. Instead, we must anticipate opposition and

address it directly with patience, purpose, and resolve. It is far easier to disarm a potential opponent before a conflict begins than in the midst

*"Better to be wise by
the misfortunes of others
than by your own."*

—Aesop

of a battle. By anticipating opponents' concerns and addressing those immediately as part of introducing change, reformers can guarantee less troublesome implementation and a far greater chance of success.

Summary

No one knows exactly how many grading and reporting reform efforts have succeeded or failed. This is especially true of efforts to implement standards-based approaches to grading and reporting, both because these programs vary so widely and because success is hard to define. Is reporting on specific standards or strands of standards in each subject area or class enough, or must we also tie proficiency to specific student work samples? Is changing the report card in grades K–5 sufficient, or must the change include the middle school and high school report cards as well?

Regardless of the criteria for success, it's clear that many grading and reporting reform efforts don't get very far. A few years into the process, opponents gather support and call for a return to traditional grading and reporting policies and practices; and eventually, reforms are cast aside.

Because every district and school is different, no single approach to reform will always work. But reform efforts that simplify the process, take things in order, address *why* before *what*, understand the importance of traditions like those associated with class rank and valedictorian selection, and anticipate opposition have a far greater chance of success. To bring about meaningful and enduring change, reform efforts must be purposeful, systematic, informed, and strategic. The next chapter turns to an important initial step in this strategic reform process: forming a Coalition for Change.

CHAPTER 2

Form a Coalition for Change

No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it.

—H. E. Luccock

Watching the wildlife on the Maasai Mara in Kenya, Africa, is an incredible experience. It's especially striking to see how these amazing animals have learned to collaborate. Experience has taught them that they are better off when they work together and are in greatest danger when they are alone. Strength, security, and effectiveness come with numbers, while isolation leaves you vulnerable and weak. Your chances of success and sustainability dramatically improve when you collaborate with others, even when they are different from you.

In Africa, the gazelle, impala, topi, wildebeest, and zebra all travel together. They know that when it comes to spotting danger, twenty eyes are better than two. While one set of eyes looks for food, numerous other sets of eyes look out for danger. If a threat is spotted, the alert goes out to all, and together, they escape to safety.

Cheetahs and lions have likewise learned that they are stronger and more effective together than alone. When they form coalitions and work collaboratively, they are far more successful in capturing prey. Coalitions of cheetahs and prides of lions are also able to pursue a wider variety of prey than they can as individuals. Animals that a single cheetah or lion could not take on alone, a coalition of cheetahs or pride of lions can. When they coordinate their efforts, take on different roles and