

Mullen: Welcome to the EXPLORING THE CORE PODCAST, where we delve into the elements that make up our education system and learn more about how that system can improve for the benefit of all students in schools today.

I'm Greg Mullen, and in this episode, I address the need to understand academic standards and their role in the education system. With the incredible effort teachers are making every day, as they strive to motivate students to learn and prepare for each passing school year, I hope to impress the importance of standards as tools that celebrate student learning *as much* as they're designed to identify gaps in skill development, as well as communicate academic growth to colleagues and families.

I'll also be speaking with Ken O'Connor out of Toronto, Canada, a leader in Standards-Based Learning, about his thoughts on education, where it's headed, and the challenges we face moving forward.

Thank you for listening, I hope you enjoy the show.

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Standards are tools, and like any other tool, they must be used with intention. So what is it about standards that makes them such a difficult tool to use?

I've come to see standards as a critical piece of a larger puzzle, one in which these academic standards have been evolving in phases and currently exist in the United States in the form of the Common Core State Standards; and it is this piece of the puzzle which I believe is a critical piece to understanding and improving our education system.

It's important that we first see the standards for what they are - a document. Instructions. A patterned outline of academic skills that develop over time. It's important we recognize that This document does not say how or why students *should* develop those academic skills. It only says "what" academic skills students should develop at a minimum, as a means for identifying skill development over time. That's it. As a tool, they can be used with other tools such as rubrics and assessments in order to measure academic growth, but it's important to recognize the value of this tool, these standards, and its role in education.

I've always been interested in arguments against the Common Core State Standards. I wonder still if there were people against the state standards in the late nineties when states first developed and adopted academic standards. Where was this frustration coming from toward simply identifying what is and ought to be taught?

It's an interesting thing, people's reaction to the phrase *Common Core*, because when I ask teachers and parents about a particular skill - let's say, counting to one hundred; I'm rarely met with vitriol about such an academic expectation. In fact, I typically get responses that such a skill

is totally fine for students to learn as early as Kindergarten, or even Preschool. The moment I mention that skill is in fact listed in the Common Core State Standards for Kindergarten, the conversation pivots, sometimes quite radically, to talking about things like cursive writing and how it wasn't included, or critical thinking, or how students today are taught how to add and multiply in strange new ways. Even now, as you're listening to this podcast, you likely have opinions about each of these important topics.

I believe these kinds of disagreements reflect larger divisions in how people view not only *what* students should be taught, but also *how* students should be taught, and who should make decisions about a child's education; but it's important that I stress the role of standards is not about the *how* or *why* in education - they are solely a tool defining the *what*. As you listen to this episode, I want you to know that I recognize the need to discuss the how, the why, and the who behind deciding what is to be taught. I also recognize those aspects are important enough to be discussed in their own episodes later in this podcast series. So, for today, let's focus on the value of standards and the role they do, and ought to serve in education.

I've always felt it was unfortunate that standards were adopted wholesale for all K-12 grade levels. I don't believe policy makers and school district officials presented a strong case to the teachers, students, and families, as to the usefulness of academic standards; and as a result, we have come to feel that standards are put upon us rather than offered to us.

I know many great teachers that are teaching all the right skills in ways that are sparking love of learning in nearly all of their students.

I keep these teachers in mind when I talk about standards. It's not that standards don't belong in classrooms. It's that the skills and knowledge included in academic standards likely already exist in those teachers' classrooms. The middle school math teachers are going over algebraic and geometric concepts. The high school English teachers are providing feedback on grammar and voice. The elementary teachers are instilling basic knowledge of language and arithmetic. These things are happening in schools all over the country. Again, it's not that these things aren't being taught - it's that when a student doesn't learn a particular subset of a skill, it can often be overshadowed by their many other successes. Small gaps in academic learning at one grade level, if not explicitly addressed in subsequent grade levels, are the cause of larger gaps we are seeing develop in later grade levels.

...I speak on this in a later episode, but in the context of this episode and the value of standards, I want to point out that there are students and families receiving Bs and Cs and celebrating all they have learned, but are often overlooking the knowledge and skills that were not learned, expecting that the next school year will be better if the student simply works a little harder. Unfortunately, without knowing precisely which skills and knowledge was not learned, especially when those skills are prerequisites for later grade levels, it is this problem that standards offer solutions to schools, teachers, and families - celebrating all that was learned, while also communicating exactly what has yet to be learned.

I've worked alongside teachers for the past decade, and I can speak with confidence that the issue isn't that they aren't teaching what needs to be taught, it's that when students develop gaps, those gaps aren't always explicitly addressed. I see this happening for one of two reasons:

- 1) because students and families are not aware of precisely which skills are creating those gaps once those gaps get wide enough, or
- 2) they don't know how to address the gaps based on the specific needs of the student, the school, and the community.

Let's be clear: standards won't solve chronic absenteeism, they won't convince students to read every night or attend after-school tutoring, and they won't give families more time and resources to support their children. Academic standards aren't meant to address motivation, or solve society's issues, but that's not a reason to dismiss what they do offer.

Now, before I get into what they do offer, I want to take a step back for a second... Let's zoom out and take another look at this tool, these standards, from a broader perspective...

Let's take a moment to consider how countries communicate student success on a global scale, ensuring students are being prepared for a global workforce. Knowing *what* is expected is as important as knowing the how and why behind that expectation.

Zoom in a bit... and take a moment to think about states and companies seeking employable and innovative minds to enter their workforce and universities. Knowing *what* the workforce and universities expect, at least as far as literacy and arithmetic is concerned, is also as important as the how and the why.

Now zoom in to the district schools, charged with the responsibility of reporting out student learning for every one of their hundreds of students. Knowing *what* is being taught is as important as *what* is being learned, and starting with a clear definition of the "*what*" is a great place to start, in order to support the *hows* and the *whys*.

Now let's look at the list of standards being handed to teachers. Consider the local, state, and global impact those standards *are* having, and the impact those standards *ought* to be having.

You see, those great teachers motivating dozens of students to show up every day to read, think, and collaborate, they often don't see standards as a tool helping with the heavy lifting in their day-to-day responsibilities. Let's be honest, a book of standards on a table isn't the thing motivating students to learn. It's the personal relationships that schools, teachers, and communities build that spark that love of learning.

So what exactly are these standards supposed to offer?

Clarity. Intention. Undeniable proof that all of those great things teachers are doing are working, clearly and intentionally celebrating each success. They serve as a tool for communicating, with clarity, care and empathy, specific gaps in student learning before they progress too far along.

I've heard from colleagues that they know, intuitively, when a student is falling behind the others in reading or arithmetic. They don't need a laundry list of standards and substandards to tell them what they already know. And this is the problem I see... standards are being offered as a solution that teachers simply don't believe is a problem standards can fix. But again I impress that standards are tools designed to celebrate and communicate growth over time.

The standards are meant to objectively celebrate our kindergarten teachers playing games that teach letters, numbers, counting, writing, while also building social skills and self-regulation. They are meant to celebrate our first and second grade teachers doing activities that build grammar and arithmetic, communicating with parents about obstacles observed and overcome. And when third grade teachers and parents begin to see a divide, where some students are clearly struggling in reading and arithmetic, it increasingly becomes more time-consuming to figure out for each individual student which specific skill or knowledge was missed or forgotten. Those teachers are working to keep up with scheduled lessons for students below, at, and above grade level while parents are working to keep up with everything outside of a child's school day. But without knowing which skills were not mastered, and which skills are prerequisite for later grades, it becomes increasingly more difficult with each passing year to go back and find those skills that were missed and help a student close a growing gap in skill development.

Let me be clear: As I describe the value and importance of standards, it is imperative to note that without a solid understanding of how standards develop skills in and across grade levels, teachers will struggle to assist their colleagues in identifying ways to help students with particular gaps in learning.

By intentionally celebrating all of the wonderful learning that **is** taking place, we can simultaneously *contrast* what **is** - with what **ought** - to be addressed, but only if we have a tool that allows us to communicate how one year's skill development clearly connects the next year's skill development. If that's not what standards are doing, perhaps it's what they ought to be doing.

In later episodes, I will be discussing more about the "How" and the "Why" of standards in education. The focus of this episode is to distinguish the value of standards as a critical tool and its purpose in celebrating, not punishing, our excellent teachers and students in schools across the country.

I'd like to now shift gears a bit and share a phone interview I had with a leader in standards-based learning today, Ken O'Connor. I hope you enjoy our chat and I thank you for listening to the program.

### **Interview: Ken O'Connor**

Mullen: My interview today is with Ken O'Connor, an educator, Curriculum Coordinator, and since 1996 an Independent Consultant and Staff Development Presenter. He's a Founding Member of the Canadian Assessment for Learning Network and the Author of such titles as *How to Grade for Learning* and *Essentials for Principals: The School Leader's Guide to Grading*.

Mullen: ...a lot more people have a lot more to say about grading - especially online. I'd love to hear your take on the effect social media has had in promoting better grading practices.

O'Connor: That's an interesting question. I think it's been beneficial in the sense that it really opens up lines of communication and allows people to share ideas, to share resources, to have discussions - sometimes arguments; which you couldn't have, unless you were face to face for the most part, before we had things like facebook and twitter chats. I think for really powerful dialogue, facebook is better because you can have really long threads with people going back and forth. On the other hand, I do like twitter chats because when the moderators thought-provoking questions, even with the character limit that I think could be a very good for interchange of ideas.

Mullen: that's an important distinction... with facebook you can really speak your mind with little limitation to how much you can write, and on twitter it does require you to be concise and specific.

O'Connor: Absolutely, unless you do what certain people who are on twitter do and do three tweets in a row.

Mullen: Social media aside, there's a quick clarifying question I wanted to ask you. This first chapter of my book is dedicated to standards-based grading, and I have a question as to whether standards-based grading as a phrase is a preferred title to describe what you prefer as an approach for improving grading practices.

O'Connor: I think, sometimes, I see it as a title or a name for an approach and I think sometimes it may be a bit of a problem especially with people who don't like standards, and some people don't. Talking about social media, for example, talking about social media of a school district that calls for evidence-based reporting and grading, there are some that call it standards-referenced grading; titles are important because they set up expectations but, and in fact I prefer talking about standards-based assessment, learning, grading, and reporting. It's important to recognize they're all connected. You can't do standards-based grading without standards-based learning and assessment, and I don't see much point in doing



standards-based grading if you're not doing standards-based reporting. So I really think it's important to think of the four things together, although we do tend to focus more on grading because that's the act that has so much impact through which there are so many different ideas.

Mullen: That is an excellent clarification. I like that because when you hear standards-based, competency-based, evidence-based, referenced... all of these different words start to get jumbled. I've seen, actually had conversations online where the actual phrase, the title, is being argued as to which one is more appropriate for improving grading practices and I don't know if there's a difference as long as what you're doing behind the phrase is actually improving the grading practices.

O'Connor: I would agree and think that, sometimes, it's more appropriate to just talk about *effective* grading practices; but in terms of one of the things you just mentioned - competency-based, certainly my understanding of competency-based is that you can't do competency-based without being standards-based but you can be standards-based without being competency-based. I think that people that are implementing or favor competency-based would say the key characteristic of competency-based is the whole idea that it's much more self-paced and students don't move on until they have demonstrated the proficiency of a standard or course, whatever their organizing structure. I think it is important to recognize that competency-based is actually is, in a sense, taking it a step further.

Mullen: Now I did want to ask you... you recently published an article last year, co-authored with LeeAnn Jung and Douglas Reeves, *Gearing Up for FAST Grading and Reporting*, FAST being an acronym. You talk about making grades Fair, Accurate, Specific, and Timely - and those are really important attributes in grading. You introduce this FAST system as a response to how using points often reinforces behaviors more than it provides an accurate picture of student achievement.

O'Connor: Well, to the extent to which teachers have traditionally, and I'll admit I did it when I was in the classroom, include behaviors as part of grades, and when students see that they are rewarded especially but also punished for behaviors that their behaviors can have a very significant impact on their grade, I think yes, often it does have in a sense a greater impact on the way students behave than the way they learn. I think the main impact of that has been really throughout K-12 an emphasis on compliance. When you do what the teacher wants, you will get at least a passing grade whether you know much or not. I just see it as being so important that we recognize that there are times when we need compliance, anything to do with safety we must have compliance, but what we really want to develop in students is responsibility, and responsibility is doing what you should do when you have a choice; compliance in a sense is doing what you must do when you don't really have a choice. I think what we have emphasized traditionally have been compliance-type behaviors.

Mullen: I like that perspective - compliance is not something I hear much about when talking about standards-based grading practices so that is definitely an idea I'd love to talk more about,

but in that article you go on to say there's actually a better way to focus on the actual grading practices (F.A.I.R.) in order to promote an intrinsic motivation to learn and prepare students to be, and you actually described in the article, self-directed, independent learners. Would you share a little bit about where this article came from, and it may actually incorporate some of compliance, what's the importance of that self-directed learning coming from, particularly from your experience speaking with educators around the world.

O'Connor: Well, the importance I see is in order to succeed beyond high school wherever students go beyond high school whether it's to post-secondary education or the world of work, to be successful, they need to be self-directed, reflective learners. I'd think particular for university and college but I'd also argue for the world of work, and I think when our focus from a behavioral point of view is on compliance, do this because if you don't it will hurt your grade, what we do is we train students far more to be compliant than to be self-directed and what we need to be doing is to be building in the opportunities for students to be responsible, to develop their self-assessment skills, and they'll hopefully build those skills over the whole K-12 years, and then they will be self-directed, reflective learners when they leave us. I think, unfortunately, with traditional grading has very often led to students simply being grade grubbers. Some of them have had inflated grades because of those behaviors and they get to the next level and they're not successful, partly because they didn't have the understandings that they needed. I think that's reflected when we look at first-year failure rates in college, when we look at the percentage of students that have to take remedial english and math courses. I think if we had more accurate grades, and if we were developing students as self-directed, reflective learners, both of those things, I would like to think, would come down dramatically.

Mullen: I absolutely agree with you and I love hearing you speak to the connection of universities and the pressure of the K-12 system to provide some system of measuring that accounts for who gets in and doesn't as far as college admissions. You mention in the article that much of the defense of traditional grading is based on the claim, "It's not our fault because we have to get them ready for college."

O'Connor: It's such a bad argument, I mean I've heard that and I'm sure you have, that we have to do this to get them ready for middle school, and middle school teachers saying we have to do this to get them ready for high school, and high school teachers saying we have to do this to get them ready for college, and it's a nonsensical line of reasoning. What we have to do is what is best for the learners at the age and stage they're at, so we should be doing what's best for five year olds to eleven year olds in elementary, twelve year olds to fourteen year olds in middle school, and fifteen and older in high school, and that's not the same as eighteen to twenty-two year olds in college.

Mullen: That's fascinating, the developmental mindset that you're tapping into, treating different ages different ways based on their development. I love that idea.

O'Connor: I think, especially when you hear teachers talking about why they include behaviors, why they use mark penalties for inappropriate behaviors, it's often justified in terms of, as if high school kids were actually adults, and they're not - they're adults in training.

Mullen: In that article, you cite a 2013 USA Today story. It highlights that a growing number of college are finding GPAs to be of little use. I'm wondering if more people at the university levels are starting to see things that way, that for high school students, that system is becoming of less use because you can't treat them...

O'Connor: I mean, yea, I think, what I keep hearing, and I hear it once every two weeks if not more frequently, is somebody having looked into this and saying every college we talk to says that whatever information we get is translated into our view of admissions. So if they get GPAs that are weighted, in many cases they unweight them and do their own calculations. Lots of colleges get applications from every state probably, from half the provinces in Canada and then countries, and all of that data comes in many different formats. They have to be able to translate it into something that relates to what they want in their incoming class.

Mullen: Wasn't the SAT and ACT intended to provide that measure of allowing universities to gauge which students are, or are not, ready to go to a particular university?

O'Connor: That is my understanding but, as you know, I live in Canada and the only kids that do SAT or ACT in Canada are students who are wanting to have the information they need for entering U.S. colleges and so I have to admit I don't have a lot of familiarity or knowledge about SAT or ACT but I do know a very large number of U.S. colleges, including some of the most prestigious ones, have either dropped the SAT and ACT completely or made it optional because they have found it is not a good predictor. As I said, I only have a surface knowledge of this, you probably know a lot more about it because you've lived in the system, and I appreciate you referring to the article but it was the three co-authors and we all agreed on the final draft but there were parts of it that were in a sense more LeeAnn than the other two, more Doug than the other two, and there were parts that were more Ken than the other two. We absolutely agreed on the final draft, don't misunderstand me, but parts of it are more the purview of each of us if that's a reasonable way to put it.

Mullen: Absolutely, and the article is jam-packed with insight and excellent information on how to look at a grading system. I only have one more question about that. In the article, there's no direct, specific reference to any phrase regarding standards-based or competency-based. It seems that being in Canada versus being in the United States, versus being in any country, do you feel that the arguments for improving grading practices aren't so specific as to say one system is better than another but rather the philosophy behind the systems, such as making sure they are Fair, Accurate... is a better approach?

O'Connor: Well, I think it's a great framework or the way I would look at it is they're a set of standards. For to be effective, grades need to meet those four conditions and maybe some



others but certainly they need to meet those four conditions. I see those things as being conditions for quality and I would see that they point towards standards-based grading as absolutely being one of the ways that can meet those four conditions. Except for specific, I think we can have excellent grading practices that aren't standards-based but they really wouldn't meet the conditions for specific, because the whole idea of specific is that it is related to learning goals, standards, expectations, whatever we call them.

Mullen: That's a very good point. So even though it's not mentioned, standards-based today is definitely addressing those four attributes much more so than traditional percentage-based grading practices.

O'Connor: Absolutely. I mean, traditional grading, the issues as I see them is - the use of percentages, the use of averaging, the inclusion of behaviors in all sorts of different ways, so that would probably be the three main things or issues, but the three main ones.

Mullen: Now I have time for just one more question. In my experience, I've noticed a difference in how students react to standards-based grading practices depending on their age and grade level. My younger students, as young as third grade have a much easier time adjusting than my middle school students. I'm wondering in your experience what does percentage-based grading practices in elementary school experiences have on the challenges facing secondary schools?

O'Connor: A lot, unfortunately, and I think when you make that distinction between the third grade and the older elementary students, that's basically because, and it's probably from about grade three on in many situations, that teachers start focusing on grades. I've never heard a grade one student say "does this count?" I don't think I've heard many grade two students say that, but certainly by grade four or five you'll have students saying "does this count?" because teachers have put a number on every thing and every number goes into the grade book. I think basically we have trained students into that. Yes, it is, if students have had two or three or four years of that before they get to middle school, and six or seven years before they get to high school, it is difficult to, in a sense, retrain them. But I may be hopelessly naive and optimistic, but I really believe if we've trained them into it we can train them out of it by using practices that support learning, making it clear that school is about learning, by making the distinction between practice and performance, by emphasizing more reason for achievement and by involving them in the assessment and grading process.

Mullen: I definitely agree with you and I don't think that's naive at all. In fact, I'm hoping that it's not just possible but is something schools are actively trying to shift towards.

O'Connor: Well, we certainly have examples of it. One of the things, because I've been working on this for a long time, I mean I wrote my first article about grading published in 1995 so we're talking twenty-five years almost, and at times there seems to be very little change. One of the things I like about twitter and twitter chats is the people talking about their success stories and

students becoming learners. Occasionally people get their own students to be on chats that is what I think is inspiring and really gives me hope.

Mullen: I want to make sure that people know of any upcoming events because you speak all over the world and publishing, but where can people find you and the works you have coming out in the future?

O'Connor: All of the things I have in the next while are individual schools or school districts that are not open events. The only event that people can register for that I expect to be speaking at is the Edge conference in Orlando in early April. If people are interested, the best place to go is my website [oconnorgrading dot com](http://oconnorgrading.com). Things change quickly, though, somebody asks me for an open conference tomorrow, or I see a conference I would like to attend and I put in a proposal. Things change dramatically quite frequently at times.

Mullen: Quickly, indeed. You mentioned twitter, is there a twitter hashtag you like to follow or get involved with?

O'Connor: Well the two twitter chats I like - SBLchat which is on the first Wednesday of the month at 9pm eastern, and the other one is ATAssessment, all things assessment, which is on Tuesdays at 9pm eastern, alternate tuesdays. Both of those, SBLchats because its focused on standards-based, and ATAssessment because they seem to get moderators who ask particularly thoughtful questions, thought-provoking questions, and then the other social media that I like and engage in is the **Standards-Based Learning and Grading** facebook group.

Mullen: Mr. O'Connor, thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I really appreciate you being on the program.

O'Connor: Well, thank you, Greg, it was an enjoyable and interesting conversation. Thank you.

**[End Interview]**

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