

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 consider a recurring thought I've had about the "value" of a grade and its role as an academic currency in our education system. I'll also be speaking with Matt Townsley out of Cedar Falls, Iowa, a leader in Standards-Based Grading, about his thoughts on our education system and the challenges educators face as grading practices evolve.

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

Mullen: I've taught in classrooms for the past decade from third-grade through eighth grade. Almost every day I would reflect on the successes and the struggles from various angles and perspectives. One of those angles I'd like to highlight today is the impact of points and percentages in providing students academic feedback.

I want to look at the demands, the expectations being set, that earn students these coveted grades, these marks of academic proficiency - these notes of academic currency. That's what I'm arguing grades have become - a currency, the value of which exists only in its capacity for transaction. They've become the bills and coins for buying passage to the next grade level, participation in sports, extracurricular activities, even college admission. The more high-value a grade is believed to have, the more those grades are freely saved and spent how students and families wish.

This analogy of grades to currency isn't too far off. What's the value of a dollar bill in U.S. dollars? Can you define what the value is besides saying, "one dollar"? It's tricky, because the value of a dollar bill is determined by its demand which is not always entirely objective. When you go to the dollar store, and you give the clerk a dollar, the item you receive in return is of equal value to that dollar only because that store believes that the item sold is worth that one dollar. That item's likely being sold at a store down the street for three dollars only because that store believes that people will trade them three dollars for that item. So how does this example of monetary value and currency analogize with academic value of grades?

In a traditional academic system, when a student receives an "A" or a "3" or a 95%, the item that student traded for that grade is believed to be of equal value only because that teacher and their school has agreed that the demand for that student work is equal to the demand of that grade, number, or percentage.

How often does a student ask their teacher, “why didn’t I get an A?” or “how can I get a 100%?” It’s because the grade, the number - that point score, is the evidence they’ll use for various transactions with their parents, their peers, and their teachers. Imagine a student holding a high-quality assignment in their hand with an “A” written at the top - what about that assignment is the student most proud?

When students come to me and ask what they can do to get a hundred percent, or to ask why they didn’t get a higher grade, I’ll typically respond with something like, “Well, explain why dividing a fraction by a whole number is the same as multiplying that fraction by the reciprocal of the whole number.” The student response is generally one of dismay because they were likely expecting something like a multiple-choice quiz or an extra-credit packet. The amount of work that a student must go through for such an explanation of an academic concept is like a three-dollar price tag for something that a student is likely used to getting for one-dollar down the street.

Now let’s break this down because this gets us into some really tough conversations about standards, expectations, and feedback norms. Let’s compare two examples - both being actual academic expectations in schools today.

If an academic expectation is to recall a basic fact, if the standard for that skill literally says a student is to understand, or determine, or some other verb expecting recall of information, then a student that recalls that information will receive an “A” or a “3” for meeting that expectation. Simple.

Now if the student is expected to analyze a text and summarize the main idea with more than one relevant detail, then submitting that piece of evidence in full should receive an “A” or a “3” because both the teacher and the student agree that meeting that expectation, or standard, is worth that grade. With such simple examples, the value behind this academic currency is clear, concise, and consistently measurable. Of course, if it were this easy, we likely wouldn’t be talking about this in the first place.

Things escalate quickly when thirty students spend 10 weeks in one teacher’s classroom turning in dozens of assignments, taking various multiple-choice quizzes, each of which incorporate a variety of different facts and skills, and a few summative free-response tests with an even wider variety of skills and knowledge. This is when the academic economy becomes less clear, less concise, less consistently measurable.

The system at this point requires order, programming, due process, to ensure all student work is organized, collected, graded, returned, and sometimes even re-graded and re-returned. This is when it feels like it’s time to develop routines and procedures, rules for

deadlines and late work, aspects of management that eventually require that some skills be put off because there isn't enough time in a day.

It would be simple if students understood and communicated mastery of new concepts... submitted work on time that met each expectation for that entire 10-week period... each student would simply receive an "A" or a "3" and everyone would continue skipping along each year learning and receiving high scores. Even when students receive a "B" or a "C" there's typically mixed responses regarding their note's accuracy, but it's the student that receives the "F", a "1" or zero, or some other low note, that serious concerns are quickly raised...

Were assignments not turned in? Can we simply submit those assignments? Is there extra work that can be done? Is there a book we need to read? A report we need to write?

The critical question here becomes: *What must the student give their teacher in order to receive a grade that is valued equal to our expectations for that student moving forward?*

This is where we get at the heart of redefining the value of what a grade is worth.

Because learning is not like shopping in a dollar store. Establishing strict rules for grades places more emphasis on the points and recorded grade than on the actual learning of knowledge and skills that grades are meant to represent.

Turn in a workbook page, submit an essay, present a project and a rubric score will be kept. Complete the work and receive a grade. Sound logic for a simple enough system.

At this point, I hear teachers saying, "well if the student had simply turned in the work...if the student would just stop fooling around... if the student would focus more... if they'd listen to directions, if they'd just *do what I've made it so easy for them to do...*

Now ask yourself, how important is it that a student be able to analyze and explain the theme of a story with specific evidence. It's pretty important, right? We want humans to be able to read, analyze, critically think about, and respond with a logical line of reasoning. Now how much more important is that skill than recalling a basic fact? Ok, maybe they needed to recall that fact in order to analyze, but because both of those separate tasks were each traded for a grade as part of their final score, there's often conflated value among these assignments which should be assigned a different value. I know some teachers use weights to categorize the value of different assignments, but the idea that students and families are strategizing which assignments, which skills, which knowledge will have the greatest impact on their final grade, is inherently shifting their attention away from learning for the benefit of future learning, and training our students to prioritize a "whatever

it takes to get the grade” mindset over the learning and mastery behind the concepts we need them to learn.

What do you think would happen if students were shown how each objective skill develops into later skills, if they were coached in tracking their own progress according to a visual standards rubric? Would they cheat and simply parrot memorized answers? Would they lie and mark their self-reporting rubric inaccurately? Do you believe students have the capacity to understand how skills in one grade level are prerequisites for skills in the next grade level?

What I am suggesting here can, and has, worked in grade levels as early as early as third grade. What I am suggesting is a potential solution to problems which are rooted in our own desire to maintain strict oversight and accountability over student learning for our own sake.

I propose we coach young students to know exactly which academic standards they’ve mastered and which they still need to practice. Coach them to reflect on their time-management, without fear of punishment, to develop their desire for productivity and accomplishment. Coach elementary and middle school students alike to recognize that, when they take time to stare out a window, they only need to nod to themselves when they’ve had enough time to think about whatever they were thinking about before continuing their work on whatever skills *they know* they’ll need in the next grade level. What I am proposing is that recognize the value of improving ourselves more than we value the rewards we’re receiving for completing tasks intended for self-improvement.

I’ve worked with so many teachers that think there isn’t enough time to grade and report on all the progress students are making, but this perceived problem exists only because we’re placing that ownership of student learning on the teachers. Student learning is not the role of the teacher - that’s the role of the student. The role of the teacher is to provide a learning environment in which students can learn *how* to learn, to provide feedback on *how* students are learning, and to communicate to families the growth of their children on a relative timeline of academic expectations that begins with Kindergarten level skills and ends with High School level skills. The ebb and flow of learning in between those two points are as fluid as a child’s physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional development.

Handing a student an A for turning in an assignment and handing another student a C for turning in the same quality of assignment a few weeks late, confuses the value of each of those student-submitted assignments - both of which meet the academic expectation. This conflates the value of turning in a high-quality work with the value placed on meeting a deadline. For those of you saying deadlines are important and should be incorporated into a student’s grade, please consider the following, because I don’t know about you, but for me, as an adult, most of the deadlines set in my life are so often rescheduled, pushed back,

adjusted, moved forward, and are otherwise taken so lightly from day to day that I'm motivated only by my own personal philosophy toward how I treat others by showing up on time and following through on promises - not on how well I can do something. Rarely do I have the equivalent of a multi-million dollar business deal that depends on my ability to meet a specific deadline, and even then we're talking about high-stakes responsibilities assigned to an adult, not a child, by a company that likely hired me because I've shown experience meeting critical high-stakes deadlines. It's important to set deadlines for students and hold them accountable, but it's more important to do it in such a way that the students are learning the value of self-evaluating, goal-setting, prioritizing tasks in order for them to develop the self-reflective time-management skills they'll need when they eventually do enter the "real world" work force. Simply devaluing academic effort for a missed deadline punishes the learning and growth instead of coaching good time-management and organization skills.

This brings me to another point:

When the value of a student's work can only be determined by handing it to a teacher, the role of the teacher has become one that is solely responsible for deciding for all their students whether or not they have learned what they were expected to learn. For middle and high school teachers, who have a hundred students work in their classroom every day, it's no wonder they look at me oddly when I tell them they can track all of their student data with a standards-based approach.

Remember, in the current academic economy, the value of an "A" is believed to be equal to the mastery of specific academic expectations. That part of our system is not the part that is broken. When a student doesn't learn one aspect of that specific academic expectation, trading that for a "B" or a "C" does not communicate what part of that expectation was not met. The value we are placing behind these letter grades has been greatly misappropriated and I argue that a standards-based approach can help schools improve this part of the education system's infrastructure, but it's going to take some work to redefine these values.

Now there's clearly more to this topic than what I've described so far, and I will get into this further in the following episodes; but keep this in mind: it isn't the system that needs to be wholesale replaced - it's that this part of the system, the values we are placing behind these grading practices, are in need of constant evaluation by us - the people, the teachers, the parents, even the students, and everyone involved in this process, in order to develop productive, self-reflective, self-directed learners.

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

[Interview: Matt Townsley]

Mullen: My interview today is with Professor Matt Townsley, assistant professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Northern Iowa.

He presents at conferences and workshops promoting standards-based grading practices with a variety of peer-reviewed publications on the topic. Professor Townsley, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

Townsley: Hey, hello, hello, hello, greetings from Iowa!

Mullen: Now, I don't know if you remember, but we actually met back in June 2018. You gave an excellent keynote at a standards-based conference in Des Moines.

Townsley: Yes! I think you were wearing a shirt or something kind of gave you away or something like that, like, OK, there's Greg!

Mullen: Well, it was mentioned that I was the only Californian at that conference. That was fun.

Townsley: Yea...

Mullen: One of my biggest takeaways was a particular graph that I can still recall describing the dip in student ownership when first implementing a standards-based approach that eventually increases to a level above its original position. So, since you are a leader in that field, I was curious - is that a chart that you use often? Because it's an excellent point I think a lot of school leaders don't consider, when shifting to a standards-based approach.

Townsley: Sure, ya, I do use that often and just for full disclosure it's not empirically-based, I'm not collecting any data on it - it's very anecdotal. However, in the school leaders I talk to in the field they tend to confirm that. What happens is that students are so used to playing the points and percentages game that chasing after kleenex boxes for extra credit and halloween crossword puzzles and things like that. They're just so used to chasing points and percentages. So when those points and percentages, when the game shift essentially away from points and percentages and towards demonstrating higher levels of learning, students aren't always sure what to do about that. They're used to doing homework to accumulate points and now the purpose of homework is practice, not points, so some students being adolescents, preteens, whatever it might be, say "you know what, I'm not going to do that because it doesn't have the same value, or perceived value, it previously had." So that's the source of the implementation dip of the visual you alluded to there, Greg. What happens over time is that we found, anecdotally, as the system improves, as the system responds to change in grading assessment practices, as teachers get a better handle on it and begin to implement with fidelity, as more common messages being provided, sent and received to students, that they start to realize there once again is value in completing that practice. So, in general, what we find is that mostly students completing the practice assignments before standards-based grading tend to revert

back to doing it and, of course, as any secondary teacher knows if a homework assignment is worth twenty points, thirty points, fifty points, or a hundred points, there are some students for whatever reason choose not to do it, and ironically those students typically when there is no point value also choose to not do it there as well.

Mullen: Now that's a really important word that you're using there which is "choosing", allowing the students to choose the path that they're going to take as far as whether or not points are valuable or if the practice is intrinsically valuable to them. I'm wondering how much student choice plays a role in what you've seen schools doing with standards-based grading.

Townesley: Oh, it's huge, it's huge. I really do believe that when schools implement standards-based grading, that there's more of a co-ownership in the learning process. Not to say there's full ownership of a teacher's role or full ownership in the student's role; ideally, it would be one-hundred percent teacher ownership and one-hundred percent student ownership. What I mean by that is, if there was no teacher involved, what would be the point in having a teacher - we could all just log in to Khan Academy or whatever it might be and get our learning that way, but I really believe that the best teachers are responsive and creating learning environments, they're doing a quality job checking for understanding - that's their ownership in the learning process. At the same time, students are used to seeing 86.5% on a test and have absolutely no idea what they could do to improve that. In a standards-based grading environment, they now have their learning broken down into the learning standards and so a test or project or essay is now reported out based on the learning standards. I think the best way to describe it is, if you're a volleyball player, and your coach tells you, "hey, you're an eighty-five percent volleyball player, or your a B-minus volleyball player, that doesn't tell you a whole lot. But if the volleyball coach tells you that you're really good at spiking, but you can do a better job serving, that does tell you something, and as a volleyball player you can do something about it. You can own your part of improving. So that's the intent of standards-based grading is to enhance communication of learning in the classroom so that students can and hopefully will take more ownership in their learning.

Mullen: You're really playing into three big ideas - *ownership of learning* versus points, and how points takes away that ownership, and building on *student choice* in building that *intrinsic value* versus collecting points in order to develop that ownership.

Townesley: Yes.

Mullen: I love that. Actually, if I may ask about a study you co-authored in 2018, there was actually something similar in it, to what you were talking about right now, where you compare traditional and standards-based grading practices in a mid-western high school, and you describe how the two different grading practices resulted in really insignificant differences in GPAs; but you also noted in that study a more striking difference in how GPAs in the traditional practices could more accurately predict ACT test results. There was an alignment there that wasn't as strong as the standards-based grading students. So because there was no significant

difference in GPAs between the two grading practices, what I want to ask is about this takeaway that traditional grading practices have essentially become test prep for high-stakes standardized testing.

Townsley: Yea, that's a really good question and as you know, as someone who so firmly believes in standards-based grading, that was a really challenging piece for me to write; but the ethical researcher inside of me said these are the results and they have to be recorded as is. So one of the implications, one of the *so what*, or the potential *why* at the end of it is that students still do, in some iterations of standards-based grading, they still can try to play the grading game. For example, at the standards-based high school that was used in this study, at the end of the semester, the scores that were in the gradebook that were all based upon standards, there's a letter grade still determined from that for the purpose of reporting out on a high school transcript. So, anecdotally, again, perhaps students were still trying to play the points game even though on an interim basis they were given tips about their learning. I think one of the potential implications is how can we as a school system, even though this particular high school made a lot of strong steps toward their standards-based gradebook; how can schools take the next step and really not even discuss grades at all. Y'know, in the case of both of these high schools, both these high schools are high-achieving, the traditional school and the standards-based school, so I can only imagine there were some very motivated students in there as well. So no matter what grading system, they were under, they were going to figure out a way to play that. Finally, the other thing that, and I don't remember if it played out in this particular article or not, but something I'm very interested in right now is just fidelity of implementation. I know any school can say that they're doing "social-emotional learning" or any school can say they're doing "standards-based grading"; however, the fidelity of implementing it, as you and I know working out in the field, obviously varies. That's another thing I'd like to dig into in the future - how can we determine if a school really is doing standards-based grading at a high level, and what specific professional supports are needed... would be needed to help a school get at a high level for some of those indicators. Definitely a good study and I appreciate you bringing it up.

Mullen: Ya, absolutely, and you really got at in your response the benefits of standards-based grading practices in comparison to what traditional grading practices were showing in that study. I'm wondering if you would clarify for me the benefits for the standards-based grading practices in comparison. There's got to be a myriad of benefits from the standards-based grading approach that compares to what students are getting from that conditioning in the traditional grading practices. I'm curious what those are.

Townsley: Sure, ya, I think one of them is clarity of understanding. As I mentioned earlier, if I'm a student and I'm so used to getting 85%, that wouldn't tell me a whole lot about my math learning or my English learning or my science learning. When my assessments are broken down into standards, targets, whatever phrase is used, now I have an understanding of what specifically I understand and what specifically I still need to do a better job of demonstrating my understanding. I think clarity of learning is one of the first benefits. Secondly, frankly, it's getting

rid of meaningless work, right? I think back to my days as a high school student and there were assignments that I honestly did just because I knew I had to but honestly I didn't need to do those to show anything new or different than I understood. I could have done the first two problems and shown that I understood the math concept but instead I was forced to doing it eighteen more times. So from a student perspective, I think there's a potential there to really show what you know and move on. From the teacher perspective, then, this gives the teacher the ability to do a better job of differentiating practice assignments so, for one student, maybe the student needs two problems, for another student they need five, and another student just needs twenty-five, or three specific ones from the problem set for example. I think, from a teacher's perspective, from a student's perspective, those two things kind of colliding [to provide] meaningful work. Perhaps a third benefit is it really honors what Benjamin Bloom called back in the day "mastery learning" what some might now say is that students learn at different rates and different paces. Sometimes I'll ask teachers I work with, "hey, do you believe kids learn the same way on the same day?" and everyone says, "no way!" Well, that's because anyone in the classroom knows that students do indeed learn differently. So standards-based grading is more interested in ensuring that students learn and communicating the most recent evidence of learning - that is a much better way of indicating learning than averaging multiple attempts and including practice opportunities over time, as traditional grading does.

Mullen: Now the percentages is definitely a hot spot for conversation today and I've love to get into just that practice - and removing that practice, essentially - but I want to go back to something you mentioned in that response which I absolutely love which is your talking about activities and assignments that are essentially wasting time and are just being completed because students are being told to complete them. That's a common concern from parents and teachers that I speak with - that what this is doing is preparing them for doing things they don't like to do just because they're told to do it, which is a "life skill" they call, and my concern, my question, is what in standards-based grading in your work and your experience working with teachers across the country, how does standards-based grading connect to concepts such as conflict, self-efficacy, in ways that build that "grit" a lot of people call, to get through the work even when they don't want to or they don't see the value in that moment.

Townsley: Sure, ya, so I'd say the big paradigm shift is - and I'll use your words, Greg - to provide more ownership for students and their learning. Again, if I'm a student and I just get my first assessment back and it tells me that in "standard 1" I have no idea that I don't really understand it, and in "standard 2" I'm rocking it already, well now I know hopefully as a learner taking some ownership of my schooling experience that I need to spend more time on "standard 1". If my test just says 76%, I'm not going to have that same Ah-Ha moment. Now having that information alone is not enough to take ownership, right? There has to be that next step. So I think about what we really want for students to go on to college, what do we really want for students to be quality citizens and workers - we want them to take ownership of their job, we want them to take ownership of their learning. We want them to say, "you know what, I turned this product in to my supervisor and I want to go do some kind of quality check of my own. Through the process I've learned in standards-based grading in school, I'm learning what quality

looks like and what it doesn't look like and so I'm hoping to replicate that later on in life. As a student in college and university, again not all colleges and universities are necessarily doing the standards-based grading thing yet, I want to be able to figure out what I know and what I don't know and go and talk to the graduate assistant, the teacher assistant, or the professor ahead of time to take again an internal locus of control or mentality as a person. I believe standards-based grading really tries to influence that type of thinking. It's more about chasing down my learning where I'm doing well and not doing well, as opposed to chasing down assignments, activities, and points.

Mullen: Professor Townsley, thank you for taking the time to speak with me. Are there any upcoming events or publications in the works that people should know about?

Townsley: That's a really good question, Greg, I do have a book coming out through another publisher called "Making Grades Matter" and for those educators who have gone to a big workshop or conference and got really jacked up about changing their grading practices and perhaps even write a book about how to fix their broken gradebook from a K-12 perspective; the book that's going to be coming out is very much fitting that next step or iteration of "where do I get started" - so if you're a secondary educator trying to figure out how to get started with standards-based grading practices, hopefully you'll check out "Making Grades Matter". Also, an article coming out here along the lines of losing As and Fs, what works for schools, and implementing standards-based grading. It's a deep-dive into literature from a teacher perspective, from an administrator perspective, and from a community or parent perspective as well. It's what the literature says so far about what works and doesn't work for school implementing standards-based grading. A couple publications coming out soon that will hopefully help the school community take the next steps towards standards-based grading.

Mullen: That's fantastic. Thank you again for being on the program.

Townsley: You bet, Greg, thanks so much. Have a great day.

[End Interview]

Mullen: Hello listeners! If you enjoyed the show, you are encouraged to support the program by going online to Patreon.com/ExploringTheCore - not only can you get early access to each episode, but also bonus episodes, exclusive content, gifts, discounts, and even receive a thank you shout-out personally from me in an episode. And if you haven't already, you can order my book, *Creating a Self-Directed Learning Environment: Standards-Based and Social-Emotional Learning*, available online at Amazon and Corwin.com. Of course, you can learn more about me and my work at www.ExploringTheCore.com. Again, thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.