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Q&A: Standards-based grading expert Robert Marzano talks about Bangor Township Schools new grading system

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By **Andrew Dodson** | Booth Mid-Michigan

DENVER, Colo. — Bangor Township Schools recent switch to a standards-based grading system has parents questioning the validity of their student's grades.

School officials defend the new grading system, which aims to grade students on their ability to apply what they learn to real-world examples, and plan to continue it as a pilot program through the rest of the year.

In parent meetings last month, **Superintendent Shawn Bishop said the school district** is using research from Robert J. Marzano, who runs education research laboratories in Indiana and Colorado. Marzano's book, "Transforming Classroom Grading," is the roadmap teachers and administrators are using to implement the new program.

Read what's been going on in the Bangor Township Schools district with the new grading system, **here**.

The Times caught up with Marzano on Monday to talk about his research on standards-based grading.



Robert J. Marzano

Andrew Dodson: What is your answer when people ask you what is standards-based grading?

Robert Marzano: At its core, instead of only an overall grade for an area, it's also broken down into specific topics that were covered in that subject.

Fundamentally, there are more grades. For example in seventh grade math, lets say there are seven topics addressed, you will see a grade for each of those topics. You can still have an overall grade, such as an A, B or C; we recommend the 0-4 scale, with three being the main focus.

Think of a baseball card — when you looked at Mickey Mantle's card, it didn't say an A on the back. It included his fielding average, hitting average, homeruns — then you know why he's a good player. Why would we give a student just one grade?

AD: Were you the creator of standards-based?

RM: Oh no, it's been around for probably 30 years. Our purpose is to take research and translate it into things that people can use. We do a lot of studies, as well as put out material in certain areas.

AD: What's the biggest problem with standards-based grading?

RM: The perception is the biggest thing, really. We've had an overall grade for about 100 years, everyone is used to an A, B, C. If they knew how those things got graded, they would be shocked.

Let's say that there are two teachers, both teach Algebra I. You're idea of an 'A' is my 'C'. The difference might be is that you count homework, I don't. Grading students gets idiosyncratic to teachers, you can't attribute a grade. It could be a low grade because they didn't know something, or maybe because they didn't do their homework. It could be a high grade because that student did a lot of extra credit.

AD: Parents in the Bangor Township Schools district were particularly upset about an idea that teachers would stop grading tests or quizzes if the student fails to show basic knowledge of a subject — is that the intent?

RM: No — stop grading? A lot of times what will happen is that school districts will reference my book, or work, but not do all what I recommend. I never recommended that.

It's one thing, in your scoring assessment, that if you don't know the basics, it's clear we have to work on that, but you can let kids move into more advanced work, and go back and fill in the basics.

But, standards-based means you don't move onto the next level, until you demonstrate mastery at this level. I don't move on to sixth grade mathematics until I've demonstrated all the topics in fifth grade mathematics.

AD: Is standards-based grading continuously evolving?

RM: We continue to modify it, but those modifications are improvements. The basic idea, which has been out for about 30 years is the more scores as opposed to fewer scores; the devil is in the details.

AD: What is the biggest con to the system and what's a solution?

RM: I would say the record keeping for the teachers. It's good to use as long as it doesn't kill the teachers because of record keeping.

There is software out now, though that makes record keeping easier. It lets teachers see student trends, makes input easier.

~ Robert Marzano received a bachelor's degree from Iona College in New York, a master's degree from Seattle University and a doctorate from the University of Washington. He is author of more than 30 books and 150 articles on topics such as instruction, assessment, writing and implementing standards, cognition, effective

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