Podcast: A Path to Standards-Based Grading

Hear a principal's firsthand experience in facilitating a staff's implementation of standards-based grading. Explore some of the "bumps" and how they worked through them.

"There were bumps everywhere. We shifted the ground between kids and families' feet. Most of us go through school with the same grading systems our parents did. This was no different. We had to explain what, why, and how. We also had to share that we weren't demeaning the education or grading expectations that adults had as kids. We were simply trying to evolve."

The goal – authentic mastery.

Read Matt's article, "Our Grading System Was Setting Students Up to Fail—Until This Change" here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.400] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barclay Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:30.520] – Steve
A Path to Standards-Based Grading. Joining the podcast today is Matthew Ebert, the founder of Ebert Educational Consulting, who is a writer, speaker and principal coach with more than 20 years of experience in education, primarily focused on school leadership in urban settings. Matt has been a teacher, a director of academic innovation, an academy leader, and a school principal. I've asked Matt to join us to share his experience guiding a school through the implementation of standards-based grading. In an article that Matt wrote titled, "Our Grading System was Setting Students up to Fail Until this Change," Matt used the word bumpy to describe the transition. So I'm looking forward to learning more about the bumps that others can expect and ways that they can stay the course. I have heard too often about cases of teachers or schools or even systems turning around as their bumpy road to standards base became mountains. So Matt, thanks so much for joining us.

[00:01:47.480] – Matt
Thank you for having me.

[00:01:48.920] – Steve
Could you begin with a descriptor of the of the school and the

community where you where you implemented the standards-based grading program?

[00:01:57.560] – Matt
Sure. So our school was a small citywide public charter middle school in Baltimore City serving predominantly Title 1 students. So we were a school with high a poverty rate. And while we were in a neighborhood in Baltimore City, we were open to all comers who lived in Baltimore City.

[00:02:18.650] – Steve
And number of students?

[00:02:21.530] – Matt
We had 162 students. We were small. Well, let me rephrase. We were paid for 162 students. We had 164 kids. It's an important note, but no, we were a very small school which as you can imagine, has its pros and its cons, but really made us a really a wonderful hub for innovation. Like we got to try stuff because we have the space to operate.

[00:02:46.940] – Steve
So what were the initial elements that started you on that journey to standards-based?

[00:02:54.940] – Matt
I had been principal for a number of years in Baltimore City and we had a really strong team of adults and our kids were safe and orderly and being educated in a way that complied with all the rules and routines of the world. In Baltimore City, though, there's criteria high schools, there's choice high schools. And so the young folks who have certain academic scores and grades and test scores have access to what the district considers the top high schools and what we were seeing and feeling more and more as we connected with these schools and former students was that our kids were having a really tough time shifting from middle school expectations to, to high school expectations. And part of that is just the

reality of getting older locations, for sure, right. Even if everything is the same, things shift. But something we knew to be true and what we felt in our hearts and then was echoed as we talked to our kids was that some of the students with the highest grades from us were struggling mightily with the academic portion of these high schools, these criteria high schools, which were the ones we were told we should get them into.

[00:04:03.730] – Matt
And so that was the initial catalyst, hearing back from Shanika when she came back to visit our school as a ninth grader at one of these criteria high schools. And she was one of these kids who we loved, right? The world's greatest young person, wonderful student. But when she got into these high schools, we knew she wasn't academically capable of really right away meeting that challenge. She would need time and space and she didn't have it. And she came back and said that she had to switch schools. And that was not the final straw, but the affirmation that we needed to say like or the confirmation rather that we're right, that while we're creating the space for kids that's wonderful and delightful and they're being educated, their scores aren't reflective of the skills they've mastered.

[00:04:49.640] – Steve
Work on that line for me because I think it's powerful. "Their scores weren't an indicator of the skills being mastered."

[00:04:57.960] – Matt
So the grades they were earning, they were receiving, were not reflective of the standards and skills, the academic standards and skills that they had mastered. They were indicative of everything we know about grading systems, traditional grading systems in schools, and meant they were completing homework and they were participating in class and it meant that they were staying out of trouble. And then all those things which, which of course matter in the paradigm of school. But when

you're talking about school in terms of instruction and academic mastery and what we purport that it's for, our kids' grades were higher than what they could actually demonstrate when it came to solely academics. And that matters when you go to a high school that is going to be incredibly rigorous and expect you to be able to hit the ground running on skills they assume, you know, because you've passed those classes.

[00:05:48.770] – Steve
I've often suggested when I've worked with schools that were struggling with their attempt, I guess the word I'd used to implement standards-based grading, that they hadn't spent sufficient time looking at standards-based teaching before they looked at standards-based grading. And I'm wondering if that plugs into your experience.

[00:06:15.820] – Matt
I think it does. And I think both things have to happen at the same time. So I think in some ways we were set up for this because we'd already begun to have these conversations. We were common core aligned at that point in time or and next generation aligned for standards in terms of science. And so our instruction was built around these pieces. These conversations had already been happening with staff. We just weren't using the phrase standards based grading or standards based instruction or mastery grading. But we were having these conversations even about formative and summative assessments. We were talking about like, there was a young woman named Ryan who she's now fully grown in college and all those things and doing terrific, but she was a kid who would absolutely wait till the last minute to get something done and some teachers would care and some wouldn't. And our conversations was, if she's showing you that she knows the material, what does it matter how she gets there? So we were uniquely positioned to have these conversations about standards based instruction so that when we finally began to pilot this idea of standards-based greeting, we had a foundation of that.

[00:07:18.380] – Matt
It was still messy and difficult with lots of arguments, but it set us up for that. And I think what really changed was as we got into standards-based grading, we had that same realization that you have with other schools. Oh, gosh, we really need to talk about what exactly are we teaching if we're going to start assessing on solely these pieces? So again, we have the space for revision. We had the space for those conversations that could say, oh, this is what it looks like. Because when we went to go investigate initially and talk to other schools who were using standards-based grading, standards-based instruction did not come up. And so while our first iteration of this program when we started talking to kids, families and staff was standards-based grading, after our first year, we began to call it standards based instruction. Grading was a piece of it, but standard instruction is actually what we were doing.

[00:08:06.820] – Steve
I like that. Standards-based instruction. Because I would say, if you really got into standards-based instruction and you didn't have standards-based grading, it created a problem. It would push you to standards-based grading if you…

[00:08:21.790] – Matt
That's really what began to happen as we got better at aligning to the skills and standards. And the conversation, you know, like all conversations got pushed and nudged and molded by teachers who were strong saying, yeah, but what does that mean for this group, right? If we have an advanced group, what are we assessing on? If we have kids who are working on different skills and students and IEPs, what does that look like? So we were able to have those conversations at once. And that makes it bumpy. It's not neat. It's not clean.

[00:08:51.330] – Steve
So let's talk about some of the bumps and what you had to do. I'm guessing bumps for teachers, bumps for kids, bumps for

parents. What'd you find?

[00:09:03.250] – Matt
Bumps everywhere. Just bumps everywhere. Some that we saw coming and some that we didn't. So I think actually, families were the easiest part as we talk about all of our stakeholders, but it was our messaging about that, and it was, again, like anything else with the community. It was about the trust we'd already established and built. It didn't mean it was easy, but it meant we had some room to operate. I think the first thing that we really made clear before we launched anything was communicating out to families and bringing them in for conversations that not everyone shows up for. But, like, were offering these chances because one of the things you had to deal with was, say, like, hey, there's nothing wrong with the grading system that you grew up in. You're wonderful. Right? Like, we put that in our literal letters home. You're a great parent. You're a great guardian. There's nothing wrong. You're just as smart. What we realized is that in this new world, what are we doing here? We want a better way to communicate grades. We want a better way to communicate what Tyrell knows and what Tyrell is working on, right?

[00:10:04.180] – Matt
And so that's where this lives. And so that was really important, laying the groundwork for that. But there was a young man who, his mom is phenomenal and was phenomenal, and his name is D.J., and his mom, who loved us, came in and very clearly said, I hate this. I don't like this. I like you, but I don't like this. Why are we doing this. And that was part of the push and pull. And the goal was to be so clear that she understood it, not because she couldn't, but that she agreed with it. Like, that's a good thing to have, right? Someone who trusts you and believes in you and says, nope, I don't like this at all. Right? Because my kid's grades just went from A's to C's, and I'm trying to get this kid into high school. And so that was one of the bumps, communicating with families,

even when the system got clear, imagine coming to a school where your child has been in elementary school and a straight A student and I'm going to tell you, listen, your grades are going to go down, be easy, your kid's wonderful and amazing and they're like, okay, okay.

[00:11:07.950] – Matt
And then it happens. Oh, that really stretches that trust. So bumpy for sure with families, but we had a clear communication plan. And we were…

[00:11:20.510] – Steve
I want to stop you just for a second becasue as I process this in my head – you're trying to convince a parent that that lower grade is probably representing higher mastery in some cases than their previous higher grade than. Am I correct?

[00:11:35.560] – Matt
Yeah. I mean it's really hard, right? Like, you had kids who whatever the stereotype was, like, didn't try in classes that grades would go up because all of a sudden I'm not, I'm not dinging them for not trying, whatever that looks like they sucked through class, they got an A on the test. What do I care, right? Like, if school is supposed to be about mastering skills and standards and we know that it's about a lot more than that, but if that's like a large piece of it, then it doesn't matter if you never do your homework. So yeah, the family aspect was, was bumpy, but we had a clear plan and we were very communicative all the time. It was weekly updates about – reminder – this is what grading looks like. If you have questions, this is how we do it. We made short videos in English and Spanish to talk about like how this works for kids so you could see it beforehand. So again, it doesn't mean that everyone looked at it, but we were doing the work to try to put everything out there to say, this is different, this is what it looks like.

[00:12:33.230] – Matt

I know it says 54 on your kids progress report, but in the actual grading scale that's an 85. Like, that's annoying for families and kids. And that was again part of the bump or bumps rather was the district used a grading system and scale and you know, LMS that didn't fit that and they weren't going to change it for our one tiny school. It doesn't work like that. And so one of the bumps was making sure that the final grade reflected not the raw score. That's how we were grade things – and what they actually got without averaging everything together. And because that's part of the challenge. If Johnny is in my class, he doesn't need a final grade in our system. Johnny needs to see that you know, he's mastered this skill. He's almost mastered this skill. This is one we're still working on, right? All of a sudden the idea of failure doesn't exist. It's just where we are on the way to mastery. There doesn't have to be failure for that. So really figuring out how to plug that into this just, you know, archaic system of, no, your kid gets an A,B,C,D or F, that's it, you know.

[00:13:48.800] – Matt
So making that work took revision and time and conversation and getting wrong and converting scores, which is just messy, you know, and charts and algorithms and all those pieces. So that was a really bumpy, behind the scenes technical part that the team really made happen, right? The team of teachers saying, like, okay, well this is how this works. We need to extend this scale. Originally we had a scale that was maybe 0 to 50, 50 to 75, 75 to 80. And they were like, no, there should be more differentiation, even if it only shows up as this because there's more nuance. So that was part of the bumps. The bumps with young folks – in year two and three of it, there were no bumps because kids coming in, we had told them, this is what it looks like. It was from the get go. They knew what it was going to look like and this and that. But year one, the pilot group, the first pilot group of sixth grade kids in one math class – bumpy does not describe how it feels to go from an A plus student to a C plus student.

[00:14:53.980] – Matt
And you did nothing different. We just, we pulled the rug out from you, right? Doesn't matter how much we talked about it, how much we said we cared about you and how much you got this. You weren't demonstrating complete mastery on skills. And so now your grade reflects that. But good God, that's not what you've been taught in school. You've been taught to pay attention, work hard and follow the rules and you'll do okay. And so getting kids to understand why we're doing it, how we're doing it over and over, like what it looks like, what that 75 and raw score actually means, and that they could reassess things, that they could take things over, like if you didn't like your score, you could try it again. And you know, we really thought, and we talked about in the article, once kids knew they could do better, they would jump on board. And turns out we were just dead wrong, right? Some kids did. And many kids are like, no, I'm just fine, it's fine. We're like, "can I reassess on this?" Like, "no, no, you can't reassess on this thing.

[00:15:52.610] – Matt
You can reassess on these pieces." "But I did my homework." You're like, "yeah, that matters, but doesn't count," right? That was a lot of our language. In the handbooks we gave to families and kids – here's what matters and here's what counts, right? If you play violin or play baseball, practice matters a great deal. But what counts is how you do on the performance or on game day. So that was bumpy for that first group of kids who were just troopers, same as family was this piece of – for the most part they trusted us. For the most part they knew we cared and we had that foundation. But it didn't, it didn't mean we got off scot free. And I think the hardest and ongoing work was and will continue to be staff. Getting a group of adults to agree on an equitable system that is completely antithetical to everything they grew up in, that they've been taught and shown at any other school they work is really hard, even with people who get along. And so we started

with a team of three. We started with a pilot group, one teacher in a sixth grade math class who was going to give it a shot in a very messy way.

[00:17:05.670] – Matt
And then that teacher presented to our staff and then we formed a team of a few teachers who would go and research and investigate. How do other schools do this? What's the evidence say, what's the best practices, this and that, come back to us with a plan and then we would pilot it. So in our end of year retreat, that one teacher presented, then that other group launched in the summer, they went to other schools, we read about it, we, you know, did the homework and then we launched as like, here's what we're all agreeing to and we talked it out. And then throughout the year we found all the things you would expect in any first year rollout. We didn't plan for this. What are we doing here? This doesn't match up. What do you do for the kid who's trying super hard and still not getting it? Like, where do we reflect? That special ed was a big piece that someone said, "this does not work because this kid is working on IEP goals that aren't always reflective of grade level things. We need to change how we do this." We made a mid year switch on that.

[00:18:04.870] – Matt
And really Tom is the gentleman's name – he's the one who identified the system like no standards based creating is going to work like this. And then bringing out your special ed team and saying, well, how does that look? What does that look like? Because we had to figure out. It should be reflective of what you're working on, not what we say you need to work on in terms of if you're in 8th grade but you're working on phonics skills as an example, then we should make sure you're getting credit for these phonics skill work that you're doing. So bumps across the board and when you have enough trust and belief, you can manage those bumps. But I don't want to say for a minute that it was neat and clean and worked instantly.

It was really disheartening. And that was the final, you know, bump that I'll share. We as teachers thought we were doing a good job. And whether we are or not, when you see all the grades drop precipitously and quickly and you tear off like the veil or the mask of everything else, oh gosh, what are they learning? What am I teaching?

[00:19:04.940] – Matt
What have I been doing for all these years? That change is grief, right? And that like that change reckoning with what is my role in this? That was the hardest thing we had to deal with.

[00:19:20.860] – Steve
There's a phrase that I use in a lot of my work that says teaching is a team sport. It needs to be a public act. And I'm kind of hearing that reinforced. I can't decide on my own whether the kids met the standard. There's a team that's going to… So the team's going to define the standard and the team's got to be able to look at the student work and need to for that to be a collaborative process.

[00:19:52.530] – Matt
100%. We use the same team analogy a lot. Our workspace was often described as we're a team, not a family. And this piece, what you just mentioned, one of the things I think about was after the first quarter and we were using rubrics and we realized there are some things that to even get on the rubric you have to do, but they're not a grade. But to even get on the rubric, these things have to miss. Those were like the general expectations, if it's an essay, which I'm making up, but if it's an essay, it has to be a 12 font double spaced. And it has to this and that. But you don't get points for those things. If you don't do those things, we will not be able to grade your assignment. And so like this idea of, you and I both worked in schools long enough, we know, like, listen, we can talk about rubrics all day long. They're not a panacea. And also a lot of folks are doing checklists and not

rubrics. But there are things like you had to do the assignment the right way, whatever that thing was, or within them.

[00:20:46.610] – Matt
But that's not the grade. And there were times, and there was a girl named Zaria who I can think of as beautiful science project she did and she worked so hard on, and we're meeting with her family, she does this beautiful thing. It didn't all meet the standard. It didn't all like meet what we were talking about, but it was a beautifully done assignment. And we're like, she gets no actual credit for this. To have that conversation is really hard with families and with staff. It's a beautiful thing she did. It met the general expectation of what the art portion, but it didn't…And that's really hard. And that's because you have to be really clear with what your skills and standards are going to be and, and that you get credit as a human for trying hard and you get told and you get praise. But school's about academic mastery if it's coming to academic grades. We can talk separately about my feelings on school and it being wrong and sorting and filtering. But if we're gonna say school's about grades, it's about academics, then that's what it should reflect.

[00:21:55.410] – Steve
So if I'm a teacher, can I move to standards based instruction if it's not something my school's doing or my district's doing?

[00:22:10.530] – Matt
I think the answer is unfortunately, yes and no. I think like so many things in schools, there's a network effect. If you're one person doing on an island, it's going to be harder because you can't talk anybody about it. It's going to be harder because families don't understand why you're doing it differently than the rest of the classes. And it's going to be harder for the same reason for kids. How come Mr. B is the only person who grades us like this? That said, I think back

to our earlier part of our conversation. You can move to standards based instruction with no permission needed as much as possible. You can move to the conversation around this is what we're focusing on and if you have the flexibility or autonomy to grade in your own system, grade in your own policies, you have that ability and I think you would find that if done well, you would have the relationship and ability to inform others' instruction and to roll that out. But I say this a lot about schools, any team really, but you need the people in charge to be on board.

[00:23:15.400] – Matt
You can grassroots it for so long and you can do it in your pocket or your silo, but real change happens across the building. Otherwise you're just working in your own silo for as long as you want or until you can do it no more.

[00:23:30.970] – Steve
So can I make an assumption then? It's pretty close to the same thing is true if I said I'm a school in a system and wanted to make that move, which though you did.

[00:23:45.610] – Matt
Yes. The real thing that happened first was I called the school district, the person I had talked to and said what would happen if I just got rid of grades altogether? There was a pause, a silence, and they said, well, you could probably propose that to the school board, but then what would you do for the high school choice where we have to see student scores? And I was like, no, that's your problem. My stance is I shouldn't have to do this at all. This doesn't make any sense. And they said, well, you could pursue it, but you'd have to put something down. So again, you're still locked in. So yeah, your assumption is correct, but I stopped trying to reform the system a long time ago as a teacher and as a principal and said I'm going to do good work where I can, when I can. Which is not as hopeful as I would like it to be, but having the chance to step out of the schoolhouse and being

involved in these conversations and write about it has at least led to more sparks in other places. And so I've widened my scope of conversation than what it was before.

[00:24:49.460] – Steve
So I'll give you just a very short history lesson because I've got a few more years on this than you do.

[00:24:56.860] – Matt
Yes, sir.

[00:24:57.900] – Steve
In 1972, I was teaching in a single K-8 school district and it was brand new, so there was no existing policies or anything when I got the job. And we were non-graded. So parent conferences were actually, I met with the parents with two sheets of paper with a piece of carbon paper in between. And as I talked to the parents, I took notes and we both signed them and they left with their copy and I left with the one that went in the files.

[00:25:36.610] – Matt
I love that.

[00:25:39.410] – Steve
It was beautiful.

[00:25:44.130] – Steve
The part you need to know is a struggle – I would lay out the whole math scope and sequence. I would talk about all the skills that we had worked on so far. I would show exactly where their student was in this. And the parent would look at me and go, is that an A, B or C? [laughter]

[00:26:00.270] – Matt
And that, that is part of the whole struggle, which is, is this piece of like anything in school often, when we deal with families, we're working through their own experience. And so you're like, no, no, the A, B and C doesn't matter. So are

they good? You know, but on the flip side, my kids are in school now, right? And they're a lovely school and they're in second and Pre-K. And my second grader, who has all lovely grades, I have no idea. I know what she has in the house. I know what she can do. I know that she's currently working on fractions because she tells me. But from the school, Lex pays attention in class and she has a 1 in conduct. Like, okay. But I think that's part of the balance.

[00:26:45.360] – Steve
I can still see the looks on the parents face when they would ask me that question and I would say, "I don't know."

[00:26:51.520] – Matt
And it doesn't actually matter. They're like, but you're the teacher. You're like, yeah, we've been doing this wrong for a long time.

[00:27:00.960] – Steve
So any closing words of advice that you might want to pass on from your insights for people who would be looking at tackling a similar piece, either because they decided on their own or they've been handed the task from the system.

[00:27:20.020] – Matt
Yeah. So I think other places have done this, done this well and done this for a long time. People should look outside more. I think that's the first thing. Before, like, I'm wary of any initiative in schools for any possible reason. As you and I have both been teachers, we know what that's like. That's enough. But I think look outside and do that investigation before you even talk to your team or anything else about inside. There are people who have done this and done this well, so it doesn't mean you have to do it like them, but you should use them. So I think that's one, I think think about all of your stakeholders involved in this change and what it's going to mean for them. And then I think one of the things that we so often get wrong in schools is that how

we deal with change is it has to be people first. It's not the thing. It's the priming your team for this upcoming thing and talking about how we feel about it. Think about it, because it matters. Because in this team sport there's a lot more than X's and O's.

[00:28:18.650] – Matt
There's a lot of feelings, emotions that run parallel to thoughts. And then I would say if you do make the switch at some point, gird yourself for the reality. That first set of grades you get back, there's a high likelihood they're going to be a lot lower than they've ever been. And how will you respond not just to kids and families, but to these adults who said, I don't want to do this, let's go back to the old way. They were doing better. And you can say they weren't doing better. It was prettier, it was, you felt better. It doesn't mean they were doing better. And I'd also say to be mindful of how it levels the playing field across the board for kids who didn't always follow the rules or play the game of school well, but it gives them a better chance. Listen, we didn't find that most of the kids who were failing a class went up to an A. That didn't happen. And most of the kids that were scoring very high didn't go down to an F. But it leveled it and made it more equitable. And we didn't talk about today, but standards-based grading, for a lot of reasons is more equitable than traditional grading.

[00:29:23.610] – Matt
And then I think the last thing I would share is that I don't believe the grades need to exist. And I don't think that they do in true authentic learning. When you learn to ride a bike, when you learn to be a good partner, when you learn to do anything that you cared about, whether you wanted to or not, you learn it over time and at your own speed. These milestones we put forth are mostly artificial and they mostly exist so we can sort and filter our youth into the workforce. And that's not what school should be about. Doesn't mean it's not what it

is about. We proclaim it’s about other things, but that is the reality of a lot of our work. We sort and we filter young people from when they walk in our doors until the end. And we don’t need to do that.

[00:30:07.210] – Steve
Matt, you want to just describe a little bit of the work you’re doing with your, your consulting now?

[00:30:13.330] – Matt
Sure. Thank you. So I work with predominantly, school leaders. I also work with some school districts at large, the predominant school leaders, to really help them do the work the way they want to. And I do it alongside them, which is amazing. As a school leader, I often felt lonely. Even if I had a good network of people, I felt lonely and I felt over, over evaluated and under supported. And so I get the chance to fill a lot of the gray spaces for adults when we’re talking about how to deal with this difficult conversation, how to write the letter that you need to speak to, how to bring people together, what’s the best way to do it and how to connect school leaders. So I do a lot of connecting folks on visits and resources, and I joke that I aim to make the job 1% easier and 10% less lonely. And so that’s the work we do from whether it’s making schedules for schools and becoming their, you know, interior designers of ideas, to coaching them through difficult conversations to helping them make sure their special ed is meeting not just actual aspirational goals, but also compliance. Myself and our team is able to do all that work really responsibly to their needs.

[00:31:23.110] – Steve
Terrific. Well, what’s the best way that folks can follow up with you with questions or look at the work that you’re doing?

[00:31:29.750] – Matt
Sure. So our Most active on LinkedIn, Matthew Ebert. And my company is Ebert Educational Consulting. We have a website and

of course you can click on my TED talk and find my writings in EdWeek and EdUtopia, but LinkedIn is the best way to find me at Matthew Ebert.

[00:31:43.990] – Steve
Alright, and we'll put the article that I had read, we'll put the link in as well as the link to your website and the TED Talk.

[00:31:53.110] – Matt
Wonderful. I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

[00:31:55.510] – Steve
Thank you. Have a great day.

[00:31:57.110] – Matt
Take care.

[00:31:59.270] – Steve
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn, Eve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkeypd.com.