AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN A FIFTH GRADE READING CLASSROOM IN NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

This action research study investigated whether the use of a teacher-created, standards-based grading report card in reading communicated information on student reading progress to students and parents more effectively than the current district report card. The study ran the course of one nine-week grade reporting period. Students and parents were surveyed at the start and conclusion of the nine-week period in order to identify whether their perceptions regarding the two report card formats changed. Teachers within the school were also surveyed to provide background information regarding the teacher perceptions of grading and grade reporting. The results of the study indicated that this standards-based grading report card more effectively communicated individual reading progress and growth in specific reading areas to students and parents than the district report card. This research contributes to the fields of grade reporting, and standards-based grading and assessment methods.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

New Hanover County’s instructional practices are aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, a document whose intent is to ensure rigorous student academic performance standards that are uniform across the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2008). However, when teachers across grade levels are asked to explain their criteria for assigning a grade, the answers vary, almost to extremes. Jung and Guskey (2007) point out teachers often vary the criteria that they use to grade a child, taking into account individual circumstances, which limits consistency across the grading scale. While Lehman (1997) argues that a grade of an A on a report card is most often assumed to indicate a high level of knowledge and skill in a subject matter; assigning an A to a student that attends class, behaves acceptably, and appears to try is dishonest. Yet, Scriffiny (2008) describes the challenge of the student who was learning but achieved poorly due to missing homework, and conversely the student who learns very little but is good at “playing school” by doing their homework and extra credit. When current grading practices range across such a spectrum, it is clear that uniformity across a school-wide level, let alone state-wide seems to be on the very distant horizon.

Significance of the Problem

Most educators recognize the inadequacies of their current grading and reporting methods (Marzano, 2000). Bonner and Chen (2009) established that teachers lack knowledge of assessment and report personal use of unprofessional practices in many areas of classroom assessment, including grading. Brookhart (1993) found that teachers varied in their beliefs about the meaning of a grade, sometimes viewing it as payment for work done by the student, sometimes considering it from the viewpoint of student advocacy, with regard to the grade’s value implications and social consequences for the student. Also, according to Brookhart (1994), in practice, classroom grades have diverse uses and interpretations, including management and
motivational uses and interpretations. Teachers struggle to award grades in ways that convey multiple, sometimes mixed messages. Frary et al. (1993) found a high percentage of teachers in support of adjusting grades in light of factors other than academic achievement, such as effort and improvement. Few educators, however, have found alternatives to satisfy the diverse needs of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members.

Jung and Guskey (2007) assert that standards-based grading allows teachers to report information on individual elements of learning, a level of detail that is extremely important. Nitko (2004) reported that teachers may value both social behavior (e.g., conformity) and achievement, but if the grade reported intertwines these two, there is poor communication, and the teacher is encouraging confusion. By reporting product, process, and progress goals separately, grading practices can be more accurate and consistent, rather than various grading elements or inappropriate standards (Jung & Guskey, 2007). Teachers face the challenge of identifying a grading system that addresses these separate goals while remaining a manageable task for the evaluator to maintain. Colby (1999) recognizes the need to support teachers in designing standards-based evaluation systems, since using the traditional grade book and anecdotal note-taking on individual students is not efficient or systematic. Guskey (2001) also argues that detailed information is useful for both diagnostic and prescriptive purposes, indicating that standards-based grading facilitates teaching and learning better than almost any other grading method; however, it is necessary to determine an efficient and systematic way to gather, record, and present that level of detail to students, parents, and educators alike.

Furthermore, Guskey (2001) reports that many parents believe that consistency is a result of a well-designed curriculum, indicating the need for grading practices across grade-levels, schools, and counties to become more consistent. However, our current grading practices do not
provide an accurate indication of student achievement (Clymer & Wiliam, 2007). Students in the same school, same grade, or same class, can receive the same final grade on a report card, while having very different understandings of the course material. Price (2005) states that it is essential to set assessment standards at least at the local level for the purposes of maintaining consistency, and he/she urges education leaders to question how assessment standards are effectively established, shared, and accomplished at the local level in order to provide more accurate indications of how students are actually achieving.

**Definition of Terms**

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) define standards-based grading as measuring students’ proficiency on well-defined course objectives; while Lehman (1997) explains that standards-based grading presents honest and meaningful information that parents want concerning their children’s progress, and gives educators an opportunity to explain the types of learning and the levels of achievement schools seek. Furthermore, assessment can be defined as the overall process of making analytical judgments, and evaluation can be defined as the process of determining the extent to which students possess certain skills, knowledge, or abilities (Lehman, 1997). Additionally, grading refers to using assessment and evaluation procedures in reporting to parents, although grading methods are not uniform (Lehman, 1997).

Guskey (2001) argues that the first challenge is moving from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced grading standards. *Norm-referenced* standards compare each student’s performance to that of other students in the group or class, such as on a “curve”; while, *criterion-referenced* standards compare each student’s performance to clearly stated performance descriptions that differentiate levels of quality. Furthermore, these standards must be further divided into process, progress, and product criteria, wherein process criteria refer to how the
student achieved the outcome, progress criteria refer to how much the student has gained from his learning experience, and product criteria refer to how the student achieves on a particular assignment.

While these definitions provide a basic overview of the terms utilized in this paper, there is no definitive scale used in standards-based grading, nor are there a specific set of standards that all states or schools use. Instead, the literature explains the need for educators to evaluate the specific learning outcomes they are looking for, and to identify the standards that meet those goals.
Advantages of Standards-Based Grading

Currently, many teachers feel helpless in the face of school reform, particularly when it comes to grading. School systems often enforce set grading practices and reporting tools that teachers are required to use, generally based on a system of averages or norm-referenced grading. However, according to Cizek et al. (1996), teachers hold individual assessment policies that reflect their own values and beliefs about teaching, and grades consist of an assortment of elements that vary even from student to student within a classroom. Scriffiny (2008) believes that despite the challenges of grading, all teachers can be empowered when using a standards-based grading scale as it not only allows teachers to challenge the status quo and control their own grading practices, but it also reduces paperwork, formatively adjusts instruction, and insists on higher quality student work.

When considering the purpose of grading, Brookhart (2004) explains teachers use grades to make decisions, most often decisions about instruction. Such decisions should be based, logically, on information about achievement of the concepts and skills that the student was expected to learn. In a standards-based system, teachers can utilize formative assessments to determine which standards students need support in, in addition to determining when all students will achieve proficiency on formal assessments. Assessment conditions and criteria should be standardized as much as possible, especially for grading purposes (Bonner & Chen, 2009). Furthermore, Scriffiny (2008) explains that quality is an expectation, and in standards-based grading educators set the bar for what constitutes “quality.” Often standards-based grading scales insist that students meet a proficient standard, while requiring students to go above and
beyond to achieve an advanced standard, thus ensuring that students are able to measure the quality of their own work.

Not only are educators empowered by standards-based grading systems; parents and students are also empowered by the wealth of information present in standards-based systems and reporting tools. McMillan et al. (2002) found that non-achievement factors, including effort, improvement, and participation, were important grading considerations for many elementary teachers and factors in academic grades. However, Guskey (2001) suggests that by separating marks for learning skills, effort, work habits, and progress from grades of achievement and performance, all school constituents benefit from more accurate grade reporting and more detailed information on student learning, while Colby (1999) emphasizes that, “the most important advantage of this system [is] its impact on aligning standards, assessment, and instruction with a learner-centered focus” (p. 53). When the grading system is so clearly focused on student learning rather than student achievement or other factors, the students become more empowered to excel beyond their previous successes, and parents receive more information regarding their student’s progress towards grade-level standards.

Additionally, interviews with teachers have shown that decisions about grades are often made with a desire to encourage student engagement and motivation, rather than solely to express level of achievement attained (McMillan & Nash, 2000). Regarding the use of grades as rewards or punishment for student behavior, Frary et al. (1993) found 31% of teachers surveyed supported considering laudatory or disruptive behavior in grading; Green, Johnson, Kim, and Pope (2007) found 15% of teachers surveyed considered it ethical to lower report card grades for disruptive behavior. Jung and Guskey (2007) report that students tend to work harder when
individual efforts are reported separately, and parents prefer this approach because it provides more detailed information regarding their students’ learning.

Furthermore, standards-based grading allows teachers to report information on individual elements of learning, a level of detail that is extremely important to families of children with disabilities whose placement and intervention depend on these elements (Jung & Guskey, 2007). Scriffiny (2008) recognizes that different working styles can be easily accommodated in standards-based systems because modified assignments and assessments require no special adjustments in the grade book. The grade book simply shows where students are in meeting standards, without reference to how they are demonstrating their learning or what modifications need to be made. In short, standards-based grading provides honest and meaningful information that parents want concerning their children’s progress, while allowing educators an opportunity to explain and demonstrate the types of learning and the levels of achievement schools seek (Lehman, 1997).

**Shortcomings of Standards-Based Grading**

While researchers find that there are many advantages to a standards-based grading system, they also recognize that there are a few shortcomings. One concern that researchers addressed across the board was that individual classroom teachers had difficulty determining how to evaluate, record, and communicate student progress in a standards-based system (Colby, 1999). Lehman (1997) recognizes the need for criterion-referenced tasks to determine whether or not individual students achieve the standards; however, Lehman also recognizes the challenge of finding the time to make and record separate judgments for each student on each criterion. Additionally, developing, implementing, and supporting a standards-based system can demand additional support mechanisms, such as time, funding, and resources for all school constituents.
(Guskey, 2000). Support needs to exist at the family level, the classroom level, the administrative level, and the district level in order for the system to be fully implemented and achieve the intended outcomes.

Accordingly, Jung and Guskey (2007) argue that standards-based grading as it exists now does not benefit students with special needs, and that the current methods of standards-based grading need to be reassessed, a process which would cost time, funding, and the allocation of resources. Jung and Guskey assert that, “when the primary question addressed in assigning a grade shifts to the level is mastery of a particular learning standard, teachers are likely to find the task of grading students with disabilities more troublesome,” indicating that educators must keep all learners’ needs close to mind when developing a standards-based grading system (p. 49). While educators may find the task of grading students with disabilities complicated, the parents of those students may also challenge the validity and equity of grades addressing grade level mastery for their students who cannot or do not perform at grade-level. Schools must educate and inform all parties involved prior to implementing a standards-based system in order to have the highest probability of support and success from the school community.

**Developing a Standards-based Grading System**

After educators recognize the need for standards-based grading, they begin the task of developing a system that adequately and effectively indicates student learning and achievement based on a set of standards and agreed-upon learning outcomes. In order to do so, Colby (1999) insists that educators must begin asking themselves a series of questions.

First, educators must look at the written standards already in place at the state or local level that govern their curriculum. Do these standards embody the skills and knowledge that they would like their students to have at the end of the course? Are the standards written with a
focus on what the learner will be able to do? Are the standards measurable? And finally, do the standards provide equal access to educational opportunities for all students? Prior to implementing a standards-based grading system, educators must have confidence in the quality and equity of the standards; if not, then the first step is to revise the standards to meet the high-quality expectations and learning outcomes that address the needs of all learners (Colby 1999).

After confirming that the standards are of high-quality and equity, the next question focuses on whether or not teachers are consistently using the standards to guide classroom instruction (Colby 1999). If teachers are failing to develop their classroom instruction based on the agreed-upon standards, then there is clearly a lack of consistency across the instructional level, which means it will be difficult to establish consistency across the grading scale. Clymer and Wiliam (2007) also address the area of classroom instruction, maintaining that educators need to develop and implement a system that supports both the formative and summative functions of assessment—“formative, in that teachers can use evidence of student achievement to adjust instruction to better meet student learning needs; and summative, in that teachers can amass the information to provide a final grade for the marking period” (p. 37). Using Lehman’s (1997) definition of grading, using assessment and evaluation procedures in reporting to parents, it is clear that all types of classroom assessment need to be considered and valued when developing a standards-based grading system.

Finally, educators must consider whether the assessments that they are utilizing are purposefully aligned with the standards and instructional practices in place (Colby, 1999). All standards require assessment to know whether or not the standard has been achieved; however, the assessment must reliably convey information about whether students have achieved the standard, and for this to occur the assessments must be aligned with the standards (Lehman,
1997). Educators may need to reconsider the assessment tools they are utilizing and develop assessment techniques that more closely demonstrate standards-based learning and achievement.

Both Guskey (2001) and Colby (1999) agree on a four-step process of developing a standards-based grading system. Initially, educators must identify the major learning goals or standards that they desire their students to achieve and determine whether these learning goals are process, progress, or product criteria. Secondly, educators establish the performance indicators to determine whether or not students have achieved the learning standards. Next, it is necessary to determine graduated levels of quality for assessing student performance, as well as to develop the scale and terms to describe student performance. Finally, all school constituents who will benefit from the standards-based system must collaborate to develop a reporting form or tool that conveys student progress in achieving the determined learning outcomes. Guskey clearly explains that while reporting tools can range from weekly or monthly progress reports, report cards, open-house meetings, newsletters, evaluated projects or assignments, school web pages, parent-teacher conferences, to student-led conferences, each reporting tool must fulfill a specific, agreed-upon purpose.

**Types of Standards-based Grading Scales**

While researchers agree that there is a strong need to move towards standards-based grading, researchers shy away from advocating for one specific type of assessment scale. Rather, researchers encourage educators to follow a series of guidelines in developing their evaluation strategies, assessment strategies, and their reporting tools.

Guskey (2000) suggests using an A, B, C, or I (Incomplete) grading system, wherein students who receive an “I” grade are required to do additional work to bring their performance up to an acceptable level. This policy is based on the belief that students perform poorly or
submit failing work in large part because teachers accept it. If teachers no longer accept substandard work, the student will not submit it, and, with appropriate support, will continue to work until their performance is satisfactory.

However, Guskey (2001) also offers that if standards are set for the end-of-the-year learning objectives, reporting tools may use a four point scale, ranging from beginning, to progressing, to proficient, to exceptional, with the additional coding of “+++” for “advanced for grade level expectations”, “+” for “on target for grade level expectations”, “-” for “below grade level expectations/needs improvement” (p. 24). This type of system helps move from norm-referenced standards to the criterion-referenced question of, “Where is my child in relation to grade-level learning goals and expectations?”

Colby (1999) describes the process of establishing three sets of codes: one to define the types of assessments, one to define different levels of performance, and one to define the time period in which the assessment occurred. The assessment code uses four indicators: \( P \) for performance assessments, \( A \) for assignments, \( O \) for direct observations, and \( \% \) for percentage of correct answers. The performance levels code used three indicators that correspond with Colby’s district report card: + for demonstrate proficiency, a check for progressing towards proficiency, and – for has not demonstrated proficiency. Finally, the quarters in which assessments were given were color-coded in order to accurately reflect the time period of each assessment.

It seems clear that there is not a definitive type of grading scale for a standards-based system. Instead, individual schools and districts need to determine exactly what types of information they deem relevant and beneficial to report, and they need to establish their grading scale based on those determinations. Therefore, the information needs to be based on the agreed-upon, high-quality, equitable standards used for assessment and evaluation.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-mode action research study is to determine how standards-based grading in a fifth grade classroom in a rural, Title I school in North Carolina influences student and parent confidence in understanding and improving student performance in reading. Based upon the results of this study, I hope to identify ways to improve instruction and student achievement in the area of reading and assessment reporting (Ferrance, 2000). The questions addressed by this research study are

1. Can standards-based grading in a fifth grade reading classroom convey information regarding student learning in reading more effectively than the current report card to parents?
2. Does standards-based grading in a fifth grade reading classroom help parents feel more confident about knowing how to help their students improve in reading?
3. Does standards-based grading in a fifth grade reading classroom help students assess themselves more accurately in specific reading areas?

Research Design

Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered from surveys consisting of both structured and open-ended questions to gauge fifth grade parents’ and fifth grade students’ perceptions of the standards-based grading system tools used for reporting reading grades in the areas of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in the fifth grade classroom. Additional data regarding teacher perceptions of grading was gathered using Guskey’s (2000) “Grading and Reporting Questionnaire”, in order to better understand teacher rationale and understanding of the current grading practices.
Setting

The sample for this action research project included a fifth grade classroom in a rural, Title I school in Wilmington, North Carolina. The participants included the students and their families, as well as faculty currently working at the school. After all constituents were invited to participate, consent forms were reviewed and signed by parents and faculty, and assent forms were reviewed and signed by students; 20 fifth graders and their families and 17 faculty members were selected for the study at the start of the 2011-2012 school.

The elementary school uses the mClass DIBELs program to assess student progress in reading (Wireless Generation, Inc., 2000). Fifth grade students are assessed in Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). The district also utilizes the North Carolina Department of Instruction’s Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) data, a program that “allows educators to recognize progress and growth over time” in order to objectively and accurately inform and improve instruction (SAS Institute, Inc., 1991). The district also incorporates county-made benchmarking tests that identify student independent and instructional reading levels and grade equivalencies.

Participants

Students and families

The students selected to participate in the research attended a school that had 553 students, approximately 100 students more than the district average. Of those students, 50.72% qualify for free or reduced lunch. Average fifth grade class size was 30 students, eight more students than the district average. During the 2010-2011 school year, the school met 12 out of 17 target goals for Adequate Yearly Progress, or 70.6%.
The selected class had 27 students, eight are African American, three are Hispanic, one is multi-racial, nine qualify for free or reduced lunch and are thus considered economically disadvantaged, and ten are reported to have learning disabilities in the Problem Solving Model (PSM) or have individualized education plans (IEPs). Two of the students receive mental health services through the school. Nineteen of the students live in single parent or remarried parent homes. Twenty of the 27 students and their families agreed to participate in the research study. Based on the DIBELs data, seven students are at intensive risk for oral reading fluency, and four students are at strategic risk for oral reading fluency. Furthermore, based on the EVAAS data, of the 20 students who agreed to participate, ten of those students have been identified as at risk for achieving proficiency on the reading end-of-grade assessment (SAS Institute, Inc., 1991). Finally, according to district reading benchmark data, the students’ instructional reading levels range from beginning reader to ninth grade equivalency, with 46% of the students (N=9) falling in the fourth grade equivalency level.

**Educators**

Furthermore, I chose to investigate educator perceptions of current grading practices and policies in order to provide a greater context in which to consider my findings. Within the school, 17 teachers and educators were invited to provide their perceptions on grading. Of these 17, 14 returned the grading and reporting questionnaire. Of those 14, years of experience ranged from less than one year to 28 years, with an average of 9.6 years of experience. Eleven of the educators are female; three are male. Twelve of the participants are Caucasian, and two are African American, with ages ranging from 26 to 45. At the time of survey completion, nine teachers were classroom teachers in grades three through five, one teacher was an interventionist for grades three through five, one teacher was an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher
working primarily with grades two through five, one teacher was an intensive academic support (IAS) teacher working with grades three through five, one teacher was an intensive behavior support (IBS) teacher working with grades kindergarten through five, and one was the assistant principal, who has a background with music in grades six through eight.

**Researcher as an Instrument**

At the time of this action research, I have seven years teaching experience in fifth grade, teaching reading, mathematics, social studies, and science. My teaching experience has been in an urban Title I school in Massachusetts, a suburban school in New Jersey, and this rural, Title I school in North Carolina. My background is in elementary education, mild and moderate special education, and middle school mathematics, working towards a masters in curriculum, instruction, and supervision. At the time of writing, I am involved in the district’s Academic Achievement Team (AAT), a committee designed to pilot standards-based grading within the district schools. My research is conducted separately and prior to the piloting of the AAT’s standards-based grading program; however, the knowledge gained from my research has directly informed the AAT’s conversations and awareness of the current literature.

**Procedures**

**Gathering consent and assent**

By conducting this research at the start, middle, and conclusion of a nine-week reporting term, I hoped to gain more accurate student and parent perception data. This allowed for nine weeks of instruction, ensuring that students received both a county progress report and a county report card. After identifying the group of students in my reading classroom who would participate in the study, I met with parents to explain the purpose of the research, as well as the consent and assent forms. Assent forms were then sent home to parents to confirm that parents
and students in agreement with participating in this study, and consent forms were sent home to confirm that parents agreed to have their comments included in this research study. I also met with the seventeen teachers, and invited them to participate in my action research by sharing their perceptions about grading and assessment. Teachers who were willing to participate were given consent forms.

**Developing assessment standards and scale**

Next, I utilized Colby’s (1999) and Guskey’s (2001) four step process to develop a standards-based grading system that addressed the needs of my learners in the reading areas of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. I considered the 2008 North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) English Language Arts standards and determined if a) they are high-quality standards, b) they are equitable standards, and c) if I am using these standards to guide my instruction. Based on NCSCOS standards, I identified the following standards to implement in my standards-based grading in reading:

1. Reads at grade level
2. Selects books at his/her grade level
3. Demonstrates stamina in independent reading
4. Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)
5. Reads orally with fluency and expression
6. Develops vocabulary through word study
7. Responds meaningfully to literature
8. Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)
9. Applies reading skills to all subject areas
Utilizing these standards as well as the literature on standards-based grading, I developed a four-point assessment scale to be used for assessment of each of the established reading standards: 1- performs below grade-level standards, 2- sometimes meets grade-level standards, 3- achieves grade-level standards, 4- exceeds grade-level standards. I chose a four-point scale as it mirrors the North Carolina End of Grade testing scoring, wherein a student is considered significantly below proficient in a subject area if he/she scores a one on an End of Grade test, below proficient in a subject area if he/she scores a two, proficient in a subject area if he/she scores a three, and advanced proficient in a subject area if he/she scores a four (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). Furthermore, considering Jung and Guskey’s (2007) discussion of modifying standards-based grading for students with disabilities, I opted to include an asterisk in order to indicate that improvement had been noted for that standard. This way, if a student with disabilities is performing below grade-level but is consistently continuing to improve, that information can be accurately conveyed to students, parents, and teachers. In order to report the standards-based grades to students and parents, I created a standards-based report card (Appendix A) to be sent home at the end of the reporting period.

At the end of the first nine weeks, I sent home two different report cards to represent student reading grades. Students received the district report card that showed their alphabetical reading average equivalent, and they received the standards-based report card (Appendix A). The standards-based report card included teacher feedback and comments about specific areas each student could focus on for improvement. Both report cards were to be signed and returned the following day.
Surveying students

After establishing the reporting tools and standards, I created a survey for the participating students to gather information on what types of information the students know about their own learning and grades (Appendix B). The survey asked students to respond to statements about their success in reading, using a five point Likert scale of beginning with “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree”, and ending with “strongly agree.” The students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. I can be successful in reading.
2. I know how I am progressing in reading.
3. I know what areas I need to improve on in reading.

For the first section of the student pre-survey, I tallied the responses for each statement and found the percentage of students for each sector of the Likert scale. The results are displayed in Table 1.

Additionally, the survey asked students to use the four-point assessment scale to determine if they perceive themselves to be exceed, achieve, sometimes meet, or perform below grade-level in the nine established reading standards. In order to determine averages of student self-assessments (Tables 2 and 11), I added all the student self-assessments in each of the following grading areas, and divided the sum by 20, the total number of student responses. Each average was rounded to the nearest tenth of a point. Interestingly, on the pre-survey some students chose to put two grades, including responses such as “2/3” or “3-4”, even though they were instructed to indicate only one, whole number assessment. In these instances, I used the average of the two numbers in the initial adding for Table 2; however, I did not need to do this.
for the results in Table 11, as students did not waiver between two possible levels as in the student pre-survey.

Following the quantitative section of the student survey, students were asked to answer three open-ended questions about how well the district report card and their teacher help them understand their progress in reading. Specifically, students considered the question, “If your report card gave you a grade for each area of reading, do you think you would become a better reader? Why or why not?” I reviewed student responses, coding them as I went along. I came up with anywhere from six to twelve codes per questions, each of which are categorized into specific themes.

I administered these surveys in the reading classroom at the start of the nine weeks as a pre-survey, based on their experiences in previous grades. After allowing parents and students an opportunity to review the two report cards at the conclusion of the nine weeks, I asked students to complete the student survey (Appendix B) a second time as a post-survey to see how their understanding and beliefs about standards-based grading had changed, if at all.

Surveying parents

Two parent surveys also were developed, in order to gather qualitative data on parent perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication of the current progress reports and report cards versus the standards-based grading report cards. The parent pre-survey (Appendix C) asked parents to respond to five statements on their student’s success in reading, using a five point Likert scale beginning with “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree”, and ending with “strongly agree.” The five statements address whether or not parents believe that their student can be successful in reading, as well as how knowledgeable they and their student are regarding their student’s progress in identified reading areas. Specific statements include: “I
know how my child is progressing in reading,” and “My child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.” The results of the first section from the pre- and post-surveys are displayed in Tables 5 and 12.

Furthermore, the parent pre-survey also directed parents to use the four-point assessment scale to determine if they perceive their students to exceed, achieve, sometimes meet, or perform below grade-level in the nine established reading standards. Parent responses were averaged, and each average was rounded to the nearest tenth of a point for reporting purposes (Table 6). Finally, the parent pre-survey asked parents to share their thoughts on the following questions:

1. Do you feel that the New Hanover County report card effectively communicates
   a. information on your child’s reading performance? Why or why not?
   b. the areas of reading that your child is assessed in? Why or why not?

The parent pre-survey was administered at the midpoint of the nine weeks, sent home with the New Hanover County progress report.

The parent post-survey (Appendix D), which was sent out at the conclusion of the nine weeks with the New Hanover County report card, used the same Likert scale to compare the county report card to the standards-based report card. The statements are divided into three sections. The first section includes the same five statements as the parent pre-survey regarding parent understanding of how the student is progressing in reading and the specific areas that the student needs to improve on in reading. The second and third sections direct parents to consider whether the district report card and the standards-based report card effectively communicate information regarding the student’s progress toward reading goals and the areas the student needs to improve on in reading. Finally, parents were asked to answer two open-ended questions:
1. Which report card more effectively communicates information about your child’s reading performance? Why do you think that?

2. Which report card format do you prefer? Why?

Surveying teachers

Finally, I distributed Guskey’s (2007) Grading and Reporting Questionnaire (Appendix E) to teachers in order to gather information on how teachers determine, report, and assign grades. The open-ended survey asked teachers to describe their beliefs on the purposes of grading and report cards, the specific methods and assessment tools they use to assess students, as well as how they utilize these tools to determine what is reported to parents on the report card. The ten question questionnaire asks teachers to identify the percentage of students in their classroom receiving specific grades and how those grades match up with the grading policy of the school or district. Actual questions include, “What do you believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students work?” and “If you could make any changes [to the current grading] system, what would they be?”
Chapter 4: Results

Student Pre-Surveys

Student beliefs

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student pre-survey belief percentages and number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can be successful in reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how I am progressing in reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas I need to improve on in reading.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While 85% (N=17) of students believe or strongly believe that they can be successful in reading, only 60% (N=12) know how they are progressing in reading and what areas they need to improve on in reading. Forty percent (N=8) of the students surveyed feel neutral about their knowledge of progress in reading, 15% (N=3) feel neutral about knowing what areas they need to improve on in reading, and 25% (N=5) disagree, acknowledging that they do not know what areas they need to improve on in reading. This was compounded by their self-assessment using the assessment scale, the results are displayed in Table 2, as many students indicated greater success than they were actually achieving in reading at the inception of the nine weeks.
Student self-assessment

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student pre-survey self-assessment averages for the nine reading standards</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops vocabulary through word study</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds meaningfully to literature</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surprisingly, at the start of the research study, the students consistently rated themselves as “achieving” to close to “exceeding” grade-level standards, a fact that is unsupported by their original baseline data. In the area of fluency, students rated themselves on average as “slightly above achieving” grade-level standards, whereas eleven students, more than half of the students surveyed, are below grade-level standards in oral reading fluency. Furthermore, the 20 students surveyed assessed themselves as 3.6 in “reads at grade level”, closer to “exceeds grade-level standards” than “achieving grade-level standards”; however, half of the students surveyed are considered at-risk for achieving grade-level standards in reading, and would be more accurately assessed as a two or a one based on their baseline data. Moreover, students assessed themselves as above achieving grade-level standards, 3.5 and 3.2, respectively, in the areas of “selects books at his/her grade level” and “applies reading skills to all subject areas”.

Student comments on the current report card

When asked if students felt that the New Hanover County report card helped them to understand how they are doing in reading, 90% (N=18) of students responded affirmatively, and
10% (N=2) of students responded negatively. When asked to explain why or why not, students responded that the New Hanover County report card system of a letter grade and possible teacher comment helps them: do better, know their grades/scores, know what to work on, know what they need more of, know all the information they need, and in no way as they already know about their reading progress. Based on these responses, students seem to believe that the current report card provides them information in two specific areas: 1) how they are achieving, and 2) how they can improve. Ten percent (N=2) of students responding, however, felt that the county report card told them information they already knew or that the report card needed to provide more information regarding their progress in reading.

The second set of questions pertains to teacher communication regarding student reading progress. Eighty-five percent (N=17) of students believed that they have had conversations with their teacher that informed them of how they are doing in reading; whereas 5% (N=1) felt in the “middle” about their teacher’s communication regarding their reading progress, 5% (N=1) felt that their teacher had not informed them, and 5% (N=1) did not respond to the question. Twelve codes emerged from the student responses to the question, “What can your teacher do to help you better understand how you are doing in reading?”, the results of which are displayed in Table 3. Only 10% (N=2) of students felt as though there was nothing more that the teacher could do to help inform them of their reading progress, yet 90% (N=18) of students felt confident that they knew how they were performing in reading.
Table 3

*Coded student responses regarding how the teacher can help students better understand how they are doing in reading*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help students choose what to read</td>
<td>tell students what to work on</td>
<td>Provide students advice/talk to them about reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give more practice</td>
<td>help students with the reading they are stuck on</td>
<td>help students with themes/summarizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give students more DIBELs (fluency) assessments</td>
<td>read students books at their grade level</td>
<td>help explain new words and answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tell students their scores more</td>
<td>tell students they are “doing good”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is nothing more that teachers can do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final section of the student pre-survey asks students to discuss whether receiving grades for discrete areas of reading would enable them to become better readers. Ninety percent (N=18) of students felt that it would help them improve as readers, while ten percent (N=2) of students replied that they already felt confident in knowing how to become better readers, so a different grading system would not help them. Of the ninety percent (N=18) who indicated that it would help improve their reading, nine codes emerged and are displayed in Table 4. Once again, 10% (N=2) of students believed that it could not improve their reading performance as they are already aware of their achievement in specific reading areas.
Table 4

*Coded student responses regarding the perceived influence of reporting grades for each area of reading on individual reading success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help students listen to their teacher more</td>
<td>improve student confidence</td>
<td>help students want to be better readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help students keep the areas of reading organized</td>
<td>help students take their time in reading</td>
<td>Improve student behavior towards reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make reading easier for students</td>
<td>tell students how they are doing in reading</td>
<td>Improve student understanding of the reading areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tell students what areas to improve in</td>
<td>make students better readers</td>
<td>Improve student performance in specific reading areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parent Pre-Surveys

Of the 20 parents who signed consent forms, only 15 returned parent pre-surveys, five of whom left the open-ended response section blank. Table 5 details parent pre-survey beliefs.

**Parent beliefs**

Table 5

*Parent pre-survey belief average percentages and actual number of parents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe my child can be successful in reading.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how my child is progressing in reading.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows how he/she is progressing in reading.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the 15 parents who responded, 93% (N=14) of parents believe that their child can be successful in reading, with the vast majority, 80% (N=12) of parents, strongly agreeing that their child can be successful in reading, indicating that parents view their children’s ability to learn in high regard. Eighty-six percent (N=13) of parents believe that they know how their child is progressing in reading, while 14% (N=2) feel neutral or strongly disagree with that statement. Sixty percent (N=9) of parents agree that they know what areas their children need to improve on in reading, while 40% (N=6) feel neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement. It is important to note the inconsistency in these two areas. One parent commented that they “know when [their student] excels, but they do not know how to help [their student] grow”. Furthermore, 73% (N=11) of parents feel that their child is aware of how they are progressing in reading, while 27% (N=4) do not agree. And most interestingly, while 53% (N=8) of parents believe that their child knows how to improve in reading, 47% (N=7), almost half of responding parents, disagree with that statement; once again indicating that student progress reporting is not the same as providing feedback for reading improvement.

One responder checked “strongly disagree” in all boxes including, “I believe my child can be successful in reading”; however, this same parent gave his student a rating of 2 (sometimes meets grade-level standards) through 4 (exceeds grade-level standards) using the assessment scale for each reading area in the second section of the survey.
Parent assessments

Table 6

*Parent pre-survey student assessment averages based on the nine reading standards*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Standards</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression*</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops vocabulary through word study*</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds meaningfully to literature</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)*</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates that a parent left this section blank and averages were determined out of 13.

One parent did not complete the second section of the survey, so averages are determined out of 14 total responses. On three separate surveys, parents indicated confusion or a lack of understanding with certain read areas and chose not to respond. In those instances, the averages were determined out of 13 responses. The results are displayed in Table 6.

Parent averages were most frequently 0.3 lower than student self-assessment averages, with parents rating their children 0.2 higher in only one area, “applies reading skills to all subject areas”. Compared to the high student rating of 3.6, parents rated their students closer to “achieves grade-level standards” for “reads at grade level” and “selects books at his/her grade level”, with a rating of 3.3. Parents and students assessed students similarly in two areas, “develops comprehension using a variety of strategies” and “keeps accurate reading records”; however, these areas were some of the higher rated areas on the parent assessments, while they were on the lower-rated end of the student self-assessments.

Moreover, parents on average assessed their students at “sometimes meets grade-level standards” in four separate areas including, “demonstrates stamina in reading”, “reads orally with
fluency and expression”, “develops vocabulary through word study”, and “responds meaningfully to literature”. However, two of the standards were responded to by only 13 of the parents, with one parent placing a question mark in the box for “develops vocabulary through word study”, and one parent writing “don’t know” for “reads orally with fluency”.

Parents comments on the current report card

Finally, parents were asked to describe whether the New Hanover County report card effectively communicates information on their children’s reading performance and the areas of reading that their children are assessed in. Regarding communicating information on their child’s reading performance, 29% (N=4) of parents said that they felt the report card communicated effectively, 57% (N=8) of parents felt the report card did not communicate effectively, 7% (N=1) of parents stated that it “depends on the teacher”, and 7% (N=1) of parents did not respond. Of the 29% (N=4) of parents who responded affirmatively, 25% (N=2) of them did not provide an explanation. Of the 14% (N=2) who did provide explanations, 7% (N=1) stated simply that the report card was “self explanatory”, while the other expressed that it gave the child’s grade and “school staff and teachers do their best to share as much as they can about student progress”. This addendum describes teacher and staff efforts more than it describes the effectiveness of the New Hanover County report card’s communication. The parent who commented that it “depends on the teacher” conveyed a similar sentiment, remarking that certain teachers “make the effort to explain [the student’s] report card grade” and provides supplemental materials that give more information on student achievement.

Of the 57% (N=8) of parents who did not feel as though the New Hanover County report card communicated effectively, eight different categories emerged, as parents often cited more than one reason for their beliefs. Most commonly cited was the fact that the report card’s grade
provided no or too little explanation, specifically that student achievement/levels were not clear, specific reading areas achievement was not clear, and what was assessed to get the report card grade was not clear. Many parents felt that the report card did not clearly delineate between their children’s abilities, strengths, and weaknesses versus their children’s achievement, stating that the report card did not “accurately represent [their] whole child”. In that regard, one parent cited that her child’s school experience could not be accurately reflected by the New Hanover County report card as she has an individualized education plan (IEP), and therefore is an “unusual” case.

The second question on the parent pre-survey asked parents to determine whether the New Hanover County report card effectively communicates the areas of reading that their children are assessed in. Initial responses were identical to the previous question, with 29% (N=4) of parents responding affirmatively, 57% (N=8) of parents responding negatively, 7% (N=1) of parents stating it “depends on the teacher”, and 7% (N=1) of parents not responding. Of the parents who responded affirmatively, 75% (N=3) did not provide explanation, and 25% (N=1) stated that “it is self-explanatory”. However, of the 57% (N=8) who answered negatively, eight categories emerged again. Thirty-eight percent (N=3) of parents felt that the content was unclear, sharing that the letter grade does not indicate the method of assessment or areas of assessment. Thirteen percent (N=1) of parents shared that she cannot identify the reading areas, “but feels [she] should be able to”. Parents also noted that there is no information provided on how to improve or what areas are needed to be improved upon, thus the report card is too standardized. The parent of the child with an IEP cited again that she was an “unusual case” and that the report card did not provide enough information for her child. Finally, the same parent who felt that the effectiveness of the report card’s communication depended upon the teacher,
repeated that the teacher can make the report card more effective by his or her own means of communication.

Teacher Surveys

In order to gather additional information to provide a more detailed backdrop for my data collection, I surveyed the teachers and staff at the school in order to determine their perceptions of grading and reporting as based on their experiences prior to and at this school. Using Guskey’s (2001) Grading and Reporting Questionnaire, teachers answered questions regarding their actual grading process as well as their ideal grading process. This information details the specific teacher beliefs within the school, as well as describes the mindset of the teachers who have taught and graded the students within the study.

The first set of questions asks teachers to explain what they believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students’ work, and ideally what the major purpose is that report cards should serve. Notably, the range of answers is as diverse as the teachers surveyed. Some teachers followed the tack that we assign grades because we “have to” and “parents expect it”, while others touted the virtues of providing feedback to inspire student growth. Twenty-nine percent (N=5) of teachers felt that report cards reported student current levels, and supplied parents with information regarding student performance. Twenty-one percent (N=4) of teachers feel that report cards serve students, presenting students with knowledge on their performance. Thirty-six percent (N=6) of teachers cite accountability, stating that report cards hold parents, students, and teachers accountable for student achievement, while 14% (N=2) express that report cards serve to provide feedback for students and parents. Seven percent (N=1) of teachers use report cards to determine instructional needs; however, the majority of teachers, 43% (N=7), feel that report cards share the progress and growth of students,
indicating that one of the major purposes for report cards is to simply report information, rather than impart information for student improvement.

When asked what the ideal purposes for report cards and grades should be, teachers did not respond that report cards should simply report grades. Instead, of the fourteen responding teachers, there were thirteen different ideal purposes for report cards shared. While some teachers felt that grades should inform parents, most teachers felt that grades should inform all school constituents on student progress, achievement, and areas of growth. Fourteen percent (N=2) of teachers felt, respectively, that grades and report cards should serve to motivate students, hold students accountable, provide feedback, address individual student abilities, represent teachers to administration, identify student growth and progress, focus on specific teaching areas, keep an active line of communication open, and be a true representation of each individual student. Twenty-one percent (N=3) felt that report cards should show mastered student objectives and student achievement, while 43% (N=7) of teachers agree that grades and report cards should show areas of need for student improvement.

After detailing the purposes of report cards and grading, teachers outlined the percentage of grades within their classroom, as well as what they believe the ideal percentage of grades should be within their classroom. Only twelve respondents demarcated actual grading percentages, and thirteen respondents described ideal grading percentages, as two of the respondents, the ESL teacher and the interventionist, do not assign grades in their classrooms. The results were averaged and are outlined in Table 7.
As shown, teachers would prefer that students receive a higher percentage of As than they are currently receiving, with one respondent stating that he feels 100% of the class should receive As as an indication of mastery learning. Comparatively, actual averages show that students are receiving Bs most often, with the top two grades representing 62% of the class, and somewhat of a Bell curve for A-C grades. However, ideal percentages would have 76% of the class earning As and Bs, with the percentage amount dropping with each grade below an A, indicating that teachers feel strongly that students should be achieving at a level of mastery more often. Only 7%, or one teacher out of fourteen, indicated that they felt that Es or Fs should be assigned.

In the next section, teachers were shown a list of four different grading scales, and they were asked to comment on the scales, recommend changes to the scales, and compare the scales to the current grading system used in their district. The grading system that is being used at the time of writing is a seven-point grading system, wherein grades are assigned as: A+ (98-100%), A (93-97%), B (85-92%), C (77-84%), D (69-76%), F (68% or lower). Thirty-six percent (N=6) of teachers prefer a ten-point grading scale (A is 90-100%, etc.) to the seven-point grading scale we currently use, stating that it seems to more accurately represent the student spread of achievement. Thirty-six percent (N=6) of teachers also felt that a four-step grading system, such as the example of “exceptional”, “proficient”, “basic”, and “below basic” would be preferable to the current grading system as well. One respondent stated that we need to “find an innovative,
less archaic method for assessing children based solely on individual student needs,” whereas another respondent felt that teachers should not use averages to assign grades. One teacher suggested including student attitude and participation in the grading system, while another felt that grading systems need to clarify what is being assessed. Another response indicated the need for grades to allow retesting and relearning so as to achieve mastery, while two more respondents agreed that grading systems should focus on standards and skills, not subjects. Twenty-one percent (N=3) of people surveyed did not feel that any changes needed to made to the current grading system, declaring that it works “as is”. This statement is intriguing as only 29% (N=4) of teachers felt that there was an established, uniform grading policy within the school or district and 71% (N=10) felt that there was not an established grading system in place. When asked to rate their understanding of policies on a continuum from “not at all” to “very well”, 36% (N=5) of teachers asserted that there was no policy to understand, while others’ levels of understanding ranged the gamut. Figure 1 illustrates the nine responses.

Figure 1

*Teacher self-perceptions of understanding of district grading policies*

```
1x----------------xx2---------x-------xx3x---------------4-------x------x5
```

Not at all Somewhat Very well

After discussing their individual understandings of the current grading policies, teachers were asked to rank six purposes for grade reporting systems from a scale of 1 (Most important) to 6 (Least important). The results are listed in Table 8.
Table 8

*Percentage of teacher rankings of purposes of grade reporting systems*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>2 %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>3 %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>4 %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>5 %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>6 %</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicate information to parents about students’ achievement and performance in school</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information to students for self-evaluation</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select, identify, or group students for certain educational programs (Honors classes, etc.)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide incentives for students to learn</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document students’ performance to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide evidence of students’ lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers felt that the most important purpose of grading is to provide information to students for self-evaluation, indicating that grades should provide some level of feedback for the students. The same educators also felt that grading systems should serve to communicate information to parents about students’ achievement and performance in school, or feedback for the parents. Less important purposes were to provide incentives for students to learn and to document students’ performance to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs, indicating that these teachers do not view grades as incentives, nor do they assign grades for the purpose of determining the value of a school program or curriculum. Furthermore, educators determined that the least important purposes were to select, identify, or group students for certain education programs, such as Honors classes, and provide evidence of students’ lack of effort or
inappropriate responsibility, areas that use grades as punitive or extrinsically rewarding aspects of the school experience.

Next, teachers were asked to identify the variety of elements that they use to assign grades within their classroom. From a list of 20 possible choices, 19 were chosen, with two more options written in, making a total of 21 different elements used to assign grades. The most consistent elements used to assign grades were quizzes and reports/projects, with 71% (N=10) of teachers utilizing these elements. Fifty-seven percent (N=8) of teachers use unit tests, while 43% (N=6) of teachers use homework completion to assign grades. The remaining categories had anywhere from 7% to 36% (N=1 to N=5) of teachers utilizing them, with only class attendance not being used by any teacher to factor into the students’ grades.

Lastly, survey respondents were asked to describe the most positive and the least appreciated aspects of report cards and the process of assigning grades. Although one teacher wrote that there were no positive aspects to grades and report cards, most teachers had one or two thoughts. Individual teachers felt that report cards and grading hold teachers accountable, compare students to other students, and/or document communication between the school and home. Twelve percent (N=2) of teachers felt that report cards hold students accountable, while another 12% (N=2) of teachers felt that grading demonstrates student needs for improvement. Eighteen percent (N=3) of teachers described report cards as motivating as well as beneficial to increasing parent understanding of expectations. Twenty-four percent (N=4) of teachers appreciated that the process rewards hard work, and finally, 29% (N=5) of teachers indentified the communication of student learning and growth as the most positive aspect of report cards and grading. These reasons correspond with the ranking that teachers assigned in to the purpose of
report cards (Table 8) being communication of information to parents and information for student self-evaluation.

However, teachers had many more negative aspects of grading to describe, aspects that also correspond with the rankings assigned (Table 8). These teachers considered grading to be punitive, to lack useful feedback and information, and to be given for the sake of giving grades. These teachers also had some concerns regarding the actual process, citing that they must assign a 60+% even if students earn a 0%, and that students and parents are discouraged if students do not receive As. There was confusion and concern regarding the grading scale, as evidenced in previous sections of the survey, as well as concern regarding what to use to assign grades (standardized tests, efforts, etc.) as evidenced also in previous sections of the survey. Moreover, teachers referred to the fact that grades are often not accurately reflective of student learning, often skewing more positively, and that some students are ambivalent to failing. Furthermore, there was some consternation regarding the fact that certain parents are only involved during report card time, and that these parents tend to blame teachers for student failure. Finally, many teachers felt that the politics surrounding grading and report cards, particularly when it comes to students with IEPs, student placement in classrooms, and student retention, prevent teachers from assigning and reporting accurate grades.

Standards-Based Report Cards

Of the 20 standards-based report cards that were sent home, 16 were returned, eight of which had parent comments as well as signatures. The average assessment levels as assigned by the teacher are reported in Table 9.
Table 9

Standards-based report card assessment averages as assigned by the classroom teacher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Standards</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops vocabulary through word study</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds meaningfully to literature</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the parent comments returned, 63% (N=5) of parents noted specific reading areas that they will work on with their children at home, based on the assessment scale scores. One parent remarked, “I let [my son] read this report card and encouraged him to continue his efforts and practice the suggestions noted above”. Another parent responded, “thank you for encouraging [my daughter] to read higher level books, as reading has always been her strong point”. Two parents used the comment section as an opportunity to ask questions, including, “Do you have any more suggestions or tutoring programs to improve [my daughter’s reading]?” and, “Can you send home specific work to help improve her oral fluency and expression?” One parent simply thanked me for the information and indicated that she was proud of her son.
Student Post-Surveys

Student beliefs

Table 10

*Student post-survey belief percentages and number of students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I can be successful in reading.</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I know how I am progressing in reading.</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I know what areas I need to improve on in reading.</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the initial survey, student perceptions have changed, moving towards the affirmative. Whereas 85% (N=17) of students previously agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I can be successful in reading,” after nine weeks 100% (N=20) of students agreed or strongly agreed. Moreover, 40% (N=8) of students previously felt neutral about knowing their progress in reading; however, post-survey results revealed that 30% (N=6) felt neutral, with the 10% (N=2) moving towards agreeing with the statement. Finally, in the pre-survey 25% (N=5) of students disagreed with the statement, “I know what areas I need to improve on in my reading”, with the remaining 75% (N=15) feeling neutral, agreeing, or strongly agreeing with the statement. The results of the post-survey indicate that 100% (N=20) of students felt neutral, agreed, or strongly agreed that they know what areas they need to improve on, with twice the number of students strongly agreeing with this statement during the post-survey than during the pre-survey.
Student self-assessments

Table 11

*Student post-survey self-assessment averages based on the nine reading standards*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Standards</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies <em>(e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)</em></td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops vocabulary through word study</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds meaningfully to literature</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the pre-survey, student self-assessment averages either dropped or, in for one standard, “demonstrates stamina in independent reading”, remained the same. Compared to the standards-based report card averages, the students assessed themselves accurately, within 0.2 of a point. In three categories – “develops comprehension using a variety of strategies”, “responds meaningfully to literature”, and “applies reading skills to all subject areas” – student self-assessment averages were in line with the standards-based grading report card average assessment. Students did not waiver between two possible levels as some did in the student pre-survey. All students marked only one number in each section of the self-assessment key.

**Student post-survey comments on the current report card**

Initially, 90% (N=18) of the twenty students surveyed felt that the district report card helped them understand how they are doing in reading; however, after the first nine weeks and receiving the standards-based grading report card, only 45% (N=9) of students felt that the district report card was helpful. Fifty-five percent (N=11) of students indicated that the district report card was not helpful, each one stating that it lacks detail that would help them grow as readers. One student explained, “No [the district report card is not helpful,] because it does not
tell me anything, just the letter grade. I think it should tell us more.” Another student remarked, “No the [district] report card does not help me understand enough. I think it needs to give me more detail on how I can improve.” A third student commented that he wasn’t sure if the report card was helpful because he could hardly understand it. Of the students who felt the district report card was helpful, all indicated that it was because they felt the report card reflected their success. In fact, one student summarized his reasons as, “Yes, because I did good in reading on my report card.”

Ninety percent (N=18) of students believed that they knew how they were doing in reading based on conversations with their teacher, which closely relates to the eighty-five percent (N=17) who believed that in the beginning of the year. However, the responses to what the teacher can do to help the students better understand their performance in reading changed. Thirty-five percent (N=7) of students wanted their teacher to help them understand their reading grade and how they got their reading grade, while 30% (N=6) wanted the teacher to provide advice on how to improve in reading. One student replied, “I think she could help me understand my average grade, or how I got my grade on [the district report card].” Thirty percent (N=6) felt that their teacher was doing everything they needed them to, while five percent (N=1) wanted the teacher to send home more parent communication. Compared to the pre-survey, student comments focused far more on grades and assessments than on specific activities or tasks.

This may be due to the fact the 100% (N=20) of students felt that a report card that gave a grade for each area of reading would help them become better readers, with 100% (N=20) of students citing that it would help them know what to improve on or work on. Additionally, twenty-five percent (N=5) of students explained that specific grades would help them better
understand why they received their overall grade. One student explained, “Yes [it would be helpful], because it would show me what areas of reading I need to improve on so I can focus harder on them.” No students made specific comments about their standards-based report card; however, there is a difference in student pre-survey responses and student post-survey responses.

**Parent Post-Surveys**

The parent post-survey was sent home with the two report cards. Of the 20 surveys that were sent home, 14 were returned. Six additional surveys were sent home, but none were returned. The results of the Likert scale questions are displayed in Tables 12, 13, and 14.

**Table 12**

*Parent post-survey belief percentages and number of parents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Strongly Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe my child can be successful in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how my child is progressing in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows how he/she is progressing in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the first two statements are strikingly similar to the parent pre-survey, with the number of parents responding remaining approximately the same. However, the difference is noticeable with the last three statements, as parents responded far more affirmatively on the post-survey to those statements. Previously, only 46% (N=7) of parents believed that they knew what areas their child needed to improve on in reading, yet, after the standards-based grading report
card, 93% (N=13) of parents agreed that they knew what areas their children needed to improve on in reading. An additional thirteen percent (N=2) of parents thought their child knows how he/she is progressing in reading after receiving the standards-based grading report card, while 79% (N=11), as compared to the previous 53% (N=8), recognized that their child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.

Table 13

*Parent post-survey beliefs about the district report card*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Hanover County report card effectively communicates my child’s progress towards reading learning goals.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Hanover County report card effectively communicates what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14

*Parent post-survey beliefs about the standards-based grading report card*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards-based report card effectively communicates my child’s progress towards reading learning goals.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards-based report card effectively communicates what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While parents’ beliefs may have changed since the parent pre-survey, parents did not seem to attribute the change to the standards-based report card communicating more effectively than the district report card. Seventy-two percent (N=10) of parents consider the district report card effective at communicating their child’s progress in reading as well as what areas they need to improve on in reading. Only a slightly greater percent of parents, 79% (N=11), consider the standards-based report card effective at communicating the same information.

Of the fourteen parents who responded, only half of the parents answered the open-ended questions. When asked which report card communicated information about their child’s reading performance more effectively, 86% (N=6) of parents responding chose the standards-based grading report card, stating that it provided more information on student learning and that it “[broke] down all important aspects of student learning”. The 14% (N=1) of parents who did not choose the standards-based grading report card replied that neither report card was more effective as, “my child is successful, so it doesn’t matter.”

When asked which report card they preferred, 100% (N=7) parents liked the standards-based report card. Seventy-one percent (N=5) specifically preferred the standards-based report card, while 29% (N=2) of those parents indicated that both report cards were acceptable. Among the reasons the parents preferred the standards-based report card were that it provided more details on student learning, it allowed for better teacher comments, it shows the child’s level of understanding, and it gives feedback to parents. Of the respondents, no one shared anything negative or neutral about the effectiveness of the standards-based report card in conveying information on student learning and progress in reading.
Comparative results of student pre- and post-surveys

Student beliefs

After receiving the standards-based report cards, student beliefs changed, moving towards the positive end of the scale. Previously, three students did not feel as though they could be successful in reading, yet after the standards-based report card, 100% (N=20) of students agreed or strongly agreed that they could be successful in reading. Furthermore, two students shifted from “neutral” to “agree” in response to the statement, “I know how I am progressing in reading”, after receiving the standards-based report card. Finally, all students felt either “neutral”, “agree[d]”, or “strongly agree[d]” that they know what areas they needed to improve on in reading after receiving the standards-based grading report card, as compared to the previous 75% (N=15). Additionally, compared to the initial survey, students felt more confident in their choices for this section, as the frequency of erasure marks and crossed out check marks was far greater in the pre-survey than in the post-survey. In fact, I noted no erasure marks for this section of the post-survey.

Student self-assessments

Moreover, in the pre-survey students assessed themselves as above achieving grade-level standards, 3.5 and 3.2, respectively, in the areas of “selects books at his/her grade level” and “applies reading skills to all subject areas”; however, student instructional reading levels at the start of the school year ranged from beginning reader to ninth grade equivalency. In fact, when the pre-survey was administered, the average reading level was 4.1, the equivalent of a “2-sometimes meets grade-level standards” on the assessment key.

After administering the standards-based report card, student self-assessments were more in accordance with the assessment scores that I was reporting as their teacher. As stated previously, compared to the pre-survey, student self-assessment averages either dropped or, in
one instance, remained the same. In the post-survey, students rated themselves on average from 2.7 to 3.3, with the highest rating still being, “reads at grade level”. However, when compared to the standards-based report card averages, student post-survey averages were more accurate, as they fell within 0.2 of a point to the standards-based grading averages. Furthermore, the average reading level at the conclusion of the first nine weeks was 5.3, which is at grade level for that time in the school year, which means that students had a more accurate perception of their own reading levels as well as their own progress in reading.

**Student comments on report cards**

A notable change occurred within the student comments on whether the district report card helped them understand how they were doing in reading. Initially, 90% (N=18) of students felt that the district report card was helpful, as it provided grades/scores, motivated them to “do better”, and even told students “what to work on”. Yet, 10% (N=2) of those initial students responding felt that the county report card told them information they already knew or that the report card needed to provide more information regarding their progress in reading, indicating that some students were interested in knowing more about their grade then the letter equivalent to an average. However, that percentage changed considerably by the end of the study. After receiving the standards-based grading report card, only 45% (N=9) of the students surveyed felt that the district report card was helpful, citing that it “needs more detail” to help students know what to improve on “for better grades”. One student even stated that the district report card, “doesn’t tell [her] what [she] did wrong” and that she would like to know so she can improve.

Regarding teacher and student communication regarding reading progress, the student belief that they understood how they were doing in reading did not vary appreciably. However, the rationale behind what the teacher can do to help students better understand how they are
doing in reading did change a great deal. At the outset of this study, students listed specific practices and activities that the teacher could help them with. At the conclusion of this study, students focused more on their grades, requesting that the teacher “helps [them] understand [their] grades” and “tells [them] how [they] got the grades”. This may be due to 100% (N=20) of students agreeing at the conclusion of the study that the standards-based grading report card would help them become better readers because it provided them with information of what areas of reading to work on as well as why they received their grades. This differs from the responses from the beginning of the study, as students gave ten different reasons as to why a standards-based grading report card would or would not be helpful to them, compared to the two reasons at the end of the study why a standards-based grading report card would help students become better readers.

**Comparative results of parent pre- and post-surveys**

Both the parent pre-survey and post-survey included the same section on parent beliefs about their child’s reading progress. Fifteen parents responded to the pre-survey, and 14 parents responded to the post-survey. One parent checked “strongly disagree” for all statements in the parent pre-survey, and while I cannot discount that data, it seems likely that the parent misread the survey or responded hastily. It would seem most relevant to focus on the 14 respondents who did not choose “strongly disagree” in the pre-survey, and the 14 respondents who responded to the post-survey.

Based on pre-survey responses, and inconsistencies in the Likert scale data, it seems that parents do not necessarily associate student progress with improvement or feedback. This bears consideration, as parents may have felt that they know how their child is progressing, but they did not seem to feel as confident about how to help their child continue to progress at the start of
However, as stated before, the most notable differences in the pre- and post-survey were with the last three statements, which focused on student progress and knowing what areas the student needs to improve on in reading. After receiving the standards-based report card, parents agreed or strongly agreed that they had an understanding of student progress and areas for growth more than they had on the parent pre-survey. When coupled with the open-ended responses on the parent post-survey, parents cited this change in belief to the detail and information on student learning provided in the standards-based grading report card.

On the parent pre-survey, parents had the opportunity to assess their students using the standards-based assessment key; however, three different parents chose to not respond to three distinct standards, as each parent indicated that they did not have an understanding of what that standard meant. Parents consistently rated their students within the grade-level standards range, although they were more apt to rate their child below grade-level standards than above grade-level standards, compared to the students who were more apt to rate themselves as at or above grade-level standards.

Both surveys asked parents to describe the effectiveness of the district report card. The majority of parents responding to the pre-survey felt that the district report card ineffectively communicated information regarding their student, citing numerous reasons including, a lack of clarity as to what the grade represented, a lack of information on what was assessed, and a lack of detail on how to improve. This information is mirrored by the fact that some parents felt ill-equipped to rate their children in specific areas of reading because they either were unfamiliar with the terminology or they may not have had enough information to describe their student’s reading progress. Additionally, a parent indicated that the effectiveness of the report card’s communication depended upon the teacher. This statement places power in the teacher’s hands,
but removes value from the district report card’s ability to communicate all the information that parents would like to receive regarding their students’ learning.

Furthermore, one parent maintained that her child’s school experience could not be accurately reflected by the New Hanover County report card as she has an individualized education plan (IEP), and therefore is an “unusual” case. Couple that statement with the fact that two parents felt that the current report card is too standardized and needs additional teacher information, and it is clear that parents have significant recommendations for improvement for the current report card.

Finally, the parent post-survey asked parents to describe their experience with the standards-based grading report card as well as describe which report card format they prefer. While 72% (N=10) of parents still maintained confidence in the district report card as compared to 79% (N=11) who had confidence in the standards-based report card, when asked to choose, parents chose the standards-based grading report card. Respondents explained the preference as a result of the dearth of information, the detail of comments and feedback, and the clear representation of student understanding in specific reading areas.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Student surveys

The change in student beliefs may be attributed to a few factors besides the standards-based grading report card. The first survey was given to students at the start of the school year, after a summer of little to no instruction, depending on the student’s summer activities. The initial discrepancy between student self-assessment scores and actual reading benchmark assessment scores indicates that the student pre-survey self-perceptions of individual reading abilities were inaccurate representations of actual reading achievement ability. The post-survey was administered after nine weeks of instruction in a fifth grade reading classroom with teacher feedback in the form of conferences, graded work, and conversations. While I cannot conclusively link the positive changes in student beliefs to only the standards-based report card; however, I can consider the student comments to the open-ended questions as evidence that the standards-based report card did provide them with more information as to their progress in reading.

Moreover, the fact that the post-survey student self-assessment averages were, at most, within 0.2 of a point from the standards-based grading report card averages suggests that students gained a more accurate understanding of their progress in specific reading areas after receiving the standards-based grading report card. While it is important to consider that students may have viewed their standards-based report card and simply copied that information onto the student post-survey three days later, that still points to student internalization of the teacher-assigned assessment grades. The hope is that that internalization would then guide future efforts in reading, focusing students on the areas that they progressed the least in or areas that they believed they had progressed further in than they actually had.
Student comments regarding the different report cards seemed to provide the most insight on the influence of the standards-based grading report card on student perceptions. Previously, students felt comfortable and had confidence in the district report card, probably because it was the only format they were used to for receiving grades. However, after being shown a different format for grade reporting, one that provided more specific detail about their individual progress in reading, students did not have as much confidence in the helpfulness of the district report card. This suggests that the students garnered more useful information regarding their individual growth in reading from the standards-based grading report card as it provided “more detail” regarding their reading grade.

Moreover, in the beginning only 10% (N=2) of students felt as though there was nothing more that the teacher could do to help inform them of their reading progress, yet 90% (N=18) of students felt confident that they knew how they were performing in reading. This initial data contradicts itself, suggesting that students identified “performance” with grades but improvement with practice and teacher feedback. The change in student focus from areas of practice to understanding the grade assigned reveals the students’ awareness that the grade stems from individual areas of practice, as well as the students’ desire to have those areas of practice explained more throughout the nine weeks. This study focused only on the summative reporting tool of report cards; however, this tool could be utilized in formative assessment as well as the summative assessment in order to provide students with greater understanding and practice throughout the learning process.

Finally, it seems noteworthy that students came to the somewhat universal conclusion that standards-based grading report cards would benefit them because it would tell them what to work on and why they received their grades. Scriffiny (2008) states that standards-based grading
allows students to see more information about their learning, which in turn motivates and guide student practice. As evidence, student beliefs shifted simply from receiving the standards-based grading report card, yet, all students came to very similar conclusions. This implies that the standards-based grading report card provided students with the additional information that they were initially seeking, and that it provided them with more focus on how to improve as readers in the future.

**Parent surveys**

While the student surveys were identical, the parent surveys were not. I felt it was more important to determine if parents felt the format and contents of the report card affected the quality of communicated information about their student’s reading progress, particularly because in efforts to provide parents with rich information, educators can often inundate parents with too much, leading to confusion and misunderstanding (Guskey, 2001). Therefore, the parent pre-survey exposed the parents to the assessment key that they would see on the standards-based grading report card, and it allowed them the opportunity to apply the key to their student. However, since the standards-based report card was sent home with the parent post-survey, it seemed counterintuitive to send home the assessment key again, as parents would likely copy the standards-based grading report onto the survey. Instead parents were asked to compare the two report cards and share their preference, particularly in regards to information on student progress and areas of improvement in reading.

Additionally, Guskey’s (2001) research found that parents see consistency in grading and assessment as an extension of a well-designed curriculum. Parent assessment of student reading progress in each of the nine reading standards tended to be more comparable to the teacher assessments, which in most cases meant an assessment score lower than the students’ self-
assessment. This suggests that parents are liable to have a more realistic or critical view of their student’s progress in reading than their student.

Guskey (2001) defends the need for educators to include parent comments and input when developing report cards and grading systems. It is important to note that while 14 parents completed the Likert scale sections of the parent post-survey, only seven responded to the open-ended questions. However, the parents who took the time to complete those questions provided insight as to what they are looking for in a report card format. Parents appreciated the district report card as it provided a specific grade which allowed parents to identify what they believe is their student’s progress. Yet, they preferred the detailed information in the standards-based grading report card as it allowed them to know what areas their children needed to improve in. Specific parent comments on the standards-based grading report card identified specific areas and acts that they would focus on with their student in order to raise their student’s achievement in the future. It seems that parents are comfortable with the district report card’s alphanumeric grade average, but they also appreciate the breakdown of achievement in specific areas of reading. In short, the data suggests that the current method of grade reporting has not been providing enough information for parents to consider themselves well-informed, and parents would appreciate more feedback.

**Teacher surveys**

Interestingly, the diversity of teacher beliefs about grading and grade reporting was as diverse as the teachers surveyed. While some teachers felt that the report card focus should be on improving student learning, others felt it should be used as a punitive accountability tool for teachers. Some teachers recognized the need for parent communication in order to best support the needs of the student, while others believe report cards exist simply because parents expect
them. The teachers surveyed could not even agree on what the graded achievement should represent: mastered objectives, student growth, student motivation, or areas needing improvement. This discrepancy in the actual usage of report cards compared to the ideal usage of report cards indicates that teachers would like to see a change in the purpose of report cards and grading.

Moreover, Price (2005) argues that it is essential for assessment standards to be in place for consistency in grading and grading practices; however, teachers often struggle to develop a shared understanding of the standards. The actual distribution of grades in each teacher’s classroom strayed, often quite noticeably, from their ideal distribution of grades. When asked if there is an “established, uniform grading policy” in their school, the majority of teachers responded negatively, which leads me to believe, that if 71% of all teachers do not feel confident or comfortable with the established grading policy, it is likely that grading is not uniform across the district, nor are grades equally representative from classroom to classroom or even student to student. If teachers do not have a universal understanding of the grading policy, it stands to reason that grades are not as meaningful as they are perceived to be, as each teacher ascribes a different meaning to the grade being assigned.

Furthermore, the extensive range of elements utilized to assign classroom grades in the different elementary school classrooms reiterates the sentiment that teachers feel there is no uniform grading policy within the district. This causes concern for all school constituents, particularly parents and students, as they cannot be sure how to determine why or how a grade was assigned.

Additionally, teachers ranked six purposes for grades and other reporting systems from most important to least important. While the majority of teachers, 79% (N=13), ranked “provide
information to students for self-evaluation”, one teacher ranked that as the least important of the six purposes. It stands to reason that if teachers do not hold similar beliefs about grading purposes and practices, it is unlikely that grades can be truly representative of the individual student, as each teacher assigning the grade assigns it with different meaning attached and with a different purpose behind it. In fact, 50% (N=8) of teachers ranked “provide evidence of students’ lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility” as the least important; however, 21% (N=3) ranked it as an important to somewhat important purpose of grade reporting. When the perceptions of grading range from punitive to formative, the grading system is clearly not established or uniform.

Also important to note were the teacher comments regarding students with individualized education plans (IEPs). Teachers that chose to bring this up in their comments remarked at the difficulty of assigning accurate grades to students with IEPs, as their IEP addresses their learning disability and some parents and administrators feel that they should not be penalized on their grade level report card. When there is not a clear, uniform grading policy, particularly for specific circumstances such as students with IEPs, grades lose some meaning, and teachers lose consistency in grade reporting.

Based on the data from Guskey’s Grading and Reporting Questionnaire, teachers need a clear, systematic approach to grading in order for grades to have consistency and meaning. The teachers surveyed all worked at the same school in the same district. Each teacher had worked in the district at least three years at the time of surveying, and yet every teacher had a different perspective on the purposes of grading and grade reporting. Every teacher used different elements to determine and assign grades, and each teacher had a sweeping range of difference in the actual grades assigned in their classroom versus the ideal grades they would like to be.
assigned in their classrooms. It is clear that at least within this school a grading policy needs to be established and enforced; however, as the current report card is a district-wide report card, the policy and practices should be system-wide.

Furthermore, the fact that teachers commented on assigning grades to students with IEPs unprompted indicates that this is an area of concern for educators within this school. Couple the teachers’ responses with the parent pre-survey comments about her child being an “unusual case” because she has an IEP points to the need to address grading and grade reporting for special education students. If both parents and teachers are recognizing the need to consider IEP students in a unique manner, then that should also be a distinct part of the established grading policy; however, teachers stated that it was unclear as to how to assign grades for these students.

**Outside factors that impacted the study**

For the sake of full transparency and accountability, it is important to note some outside factors that have influenced this study. This study was based on the North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction’s (2008, 2009) North Carolina Standard Course of Study and the North Carolina NCWISE grading reporting system; however, after the inception of this study, both those factors were changed in some way. To begin, the study’s reading nine standards for assessment were based on the NCSCOS Reading Language Arts standards; yet, the state of North Carolina began implementation of the Common Core English Language Arts standards in the 2011-2012 school year. The study had already begun, and therefore it would compromise the status of the research if the standards were changed midway. It is important to note that the school system was in a status of transition that impacts the applicability of these findings.
Secondly, the reporting system used by the district, NCWISE, was not fully set up in time for the progress reports to be sent home by the appointed date, four and a half weeks into the marking period. The information that I was given at the school level was that our school’s departmentalization within the fifth grade, meaning each teacher teaching specific subjects rather than one class of students, was making it difficult to place students into classes, as this organization was an anomaly within the district. When I addressed this concern at a district level I was told that that was not the case, and our school needed to establish the necessary course changes within the NCWISE system and send home progress report as soon as possible. The result was NCWISE district progress reports went home a day later than expected.

Furthermore, during this study, our district chose to implement the Parent Assist Module (PAM) for the NCWISE grading system, a module that allows parents to login and see all of their children’s grades and comments that teachers have entered. PAM became active seven weeks into the marking period, allowing parents to see all of their students’ grades. This impacts the function of the study, as the purpose is to determine how standards-based grading conveys information to parents, and whether it is more effective than the current grade reporting system; however, the grade reporting system changed in the middle of the study. Parents now had access to information whenever they wanted it, a freedom that led to increased parent conferences and questions regarding grading. The inclusion of the Parent Assist Module changed the grade reporting system, which changes the accuracy of this study.

Moreover, the district is moving towards a rubric-based grading pilot that hopes to be implemented in the 2012-2013 school year. This movement sprouts from similar questions to the questions raised in this study. Across the district there has been growing concern over the inconsistencies of teacher grading practices, as well as consideration that grade inflation may be
a serious issue. Parents have made increasing phone calls to district level representatives about school and classroom based predicaments regarding grading, some with accusations of teachers asking for staplers in return for good grades, some with troubles comprehending Advanced Placement course grading, even others with complaints of zeros being assigned to student work. These reports have added up over time, providing a catalyst for district-wide change. However, this movement, while beneficial for the district constituents, compromises this study, as the mindset behind grading has been questioned midway through the study, affecting how teachers and administrators view grading practices. In short, the study began in one manner, with different standards and grading policies, and it ends in another.

**Implications**

Initially, I considered researching whether standards-based grading influenced whether teacher grading could be more consistent across individuals; however, I recognized that the participants for that research study should be teachers, not parents and students. The data that I chose to gather focused on how changing the grade reporting tool could affect parent and student perceptions on reading progress; yet, I found the teacher data to be the most informative. As grades begin with the teacher and the teacher’s perception of grading and grading purposes, it was useful to identify and acknowledge the numerous perceptions and purposes that teachers in one school assign to grading. If teachers cannot be more consistent with grading, how can parents and students find consistent meaning in the grades assigned? However, this seems to be an issue with the school and district grading policy lacking uniformity or established practices than it does an issue with teachers. While it is true that teachers can have different beliefs as to the purpose of grading, they should still be able to recognize whether there is a uniform, established policy within their district or school. Without consistency across teachers and
classrooms, an “A” assigned as a fourth grade average might be a representative of “C” quality work in a third grade classroom. This points to the need for the standards-based grading report card, as breaking down a student’s achievement across specific, standardized levels, and noting whether the student is performing at established grade-level standards as opposed to alphanumeric averages, requires teachers to be more consistent and thoughtful in their grade assigning. This thoughtfulness would hopefully translate to parent understanding and student achievement, as evidenced by the research in this study.

Focusing on the student and parent feedback, both groups felt that feedback was necessary for students to know which areas they need to improve on. The current report card does not allow for individualized feedback, rather comments are coded and no more than three words long. As a teacher, it is rare to find the comment that addresses every piece of feedback you have for an individual child, and the comments are so vague that teachers rarely assign them. The standards-based report card provides feedback in the form of distinct grades for each standard in reading, as well as an area for open-ended teacher comments that explain in detail the grades assigned and areas that the student can improve upon. Scrifiny (2008) advocates that although standards-based grading can be used in addition to traditional grades, standards-based grading should replace traditional grades as the next step in curricular reform.

Yet, while parents identified the influence of the standards-based grading report card in altering their understanding of their student’s progress, students did not. However, both groups felt more confident in knowing which areas that the student needed to improve on in reading as well as how the student is progressing in reading at the time of the report card. Compiling all comments, it would be interesting to see how a combination of the two reporting tools would have influenced student and parent perceptions. Clymer and Wiliam (2006) argue that dynamic
assessment reporting motivates students to view achievement as incremental, instead of fixed. If a report card had both a summative, fixed, alphanumeric grade as well as a standards-based assessment key and grade for each standard in the specific subject areas, parents and students may have responded even more positively.

Finally, an unexpected outcome of this research was the need for a more clearly established grading policy for students with IEPs. In 1982, *Board of Education v. Rowley* ruled that, “IEPs must enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade,” and therefore a failing grade for a student receiving special education is considered a failure on the part of the education system, not the student. Parents felt that the current report card does not accurately express an IEP student’s unique learning experience, and teachers recognized that they did not have a defined practice for assigning grades to students with IEPs as they have exceptional learning styles. In short, the current grading policy does not account for students with IEPs in a manner that meets the needs of all involved. Scriffiny (2008) asserts that students with special needs’ learning styles can be accurately represented in standards-based grading systems as those systems focus simply on whether or not students are meeting individualized standards; however, Clymer and Wiliam (2006) feel that teachers may be more inclined to give credit for progress that has not been achieved for special need students’ report cards. Future consideration should be given to the needs of these students, and possible addendums could be added to the standards-based grading report card in order to accurately and adequately represent the learning of these students.

**Limitations and future research**

This research contributes to the field of standards-based grading; however, it is limited in breadth and depth. While this research indicates that parent understanding of student progress
and learning improved with standards-based grade reporting, student perceptions were inconclusive. Furthermore, the sample size was too limited to be indicative of greater trends; however, it can provide additional support and baseline information for more in-depth future research. Finally, this research raises the question of teacher perceptions of grading and grade reporting as a background for parent and student data, but it did not address the importance of the teacher’s role in assigning and reporting grades.

**Conclusion**

As educators it is imperative that we refine our assessment systems and grade reporting tools so that they best support student achievement and parent understanding. Based on the data collected in this study, it is apparent that providing students and parents with specific feedback in distinct areas of reading more effectively communicates student progress. Additionally, the specific feedback provided by the standards-based grade reporting helped students and parents feel more confident about student progress in reading as well as which reading areas needing more focused study. Finally, the standards-based grading report card provided students with more information, which allowed students to assess their individual reading progress more accurately. Clymer and Wiliam (2006) believe that appropriately designed grading systems can help identify where students are in their understanding and what they need to do to improve. Following that logic, by revising the grade reporting system to include specific feedback based on distinct standards, we can bring about a more accurate and consistent understanding of student achievement and progress to students, parents, and teachers.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Appendix A. Standards Based Grading Report Card

Pine Valley Elementary School
Mrs. Rosser’s Fifth Grade
Reading Report Card

2010-2011

Assessment Key
4 = Exceeds grade-level standards
3 = Achieves grade-level standards
2 = Sometimes meet grade-level standards
1 = Performs below grade-level standards
* = Improvement noted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Quarter 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, inferences)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops vocabulary through word study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds meaningfully to literature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps accurate reading records (DTAP)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher’s comments:___________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________

Parent comments:____________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________

Parent signature:___________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B. Student Survey

**Student Survey**

**Directions:** Respond to each of the following statements by placing a check mark in each box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can be successful in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how I am progressing in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas I need to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directions:** Think about your reading progress. Using the assessment key, indicate how you have performed in each of these reading areas.

**Assessment Key**

- 4 = Exceeds grade-level standards
- 3 = Achieves grade-level standards
- 2 = Sometimes meet grade-level standards
- 1 = Performs below grade-level standards
- * = Improvement noted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>1-4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reads at grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects books at his/her grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates stamina in independent reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops comprehension using a variety of strategies (e.g. rereads, visualizes, makes connections, infers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads orally with fluency and expression</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you think the New Hanover County report card helps you understand how you are doing in reading? Why or why not?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________

Based on conversations with your teacher, do you know how you are doing in reading? ______________

What can your teacher do to help you better understand how you are doing in reading?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________

If your report card gave you a grade for each area of reading, do you think you would become a better reader? Why or why not?

_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C. Parent Pre-Survey

**Parent Pre-Survey**

**Directions:** Respond to each of the following statements by placing a check mark in each box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe my child can be successful in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how my child is progressing in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows how he/she is progressing in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directions:** Think about your child’s reading progress. Using the assessment key, indicate how you think he/she has performed in each of these reading areas.

**Assessment Key**
- 4 = Exceeds grade-level standards
- 3 = Achieves grade-level standards
- 2 = Sometimes meet grade-level standards
- 1 = Performs below grade-level standards
- * = Improvement noted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies reading skills to all subject areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you feel that the New Hanover County report card effectively communicates information on your child’s reading performance? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Do you feel that the New Hanover County report card effectively communicates the areas of reading that your child is assessed in? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
**Appendix D. Parent Post-Survey**

**Parent Post-Survey**

**Directions:** Respond to each of the following statements by placing a check mark in each box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe my child can be successful in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how my child is progressing in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows how he/she is progressing in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child knows what areas he/she needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Hanover County report card effectively communicates my child's progress towards reading learning goals.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Hanover County report card effectively communicates what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards-based report card effectively communicates my child's progress towards reading learning goals.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The standards-based report card effectively communicates what areas my child needs to improve on in reading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which report card more effectively communicates information about your child’s reading performance? Why do you think that?

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Which report card format do you prefer? Why?

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E. Thomas R. Guskey’s Grading and Reporting Questionnaire

GRADING AND REPORTING QUESTIONNAIRE
© Thomas R. Guskey

Name (Optional) __________________________ Grade Level ________________

Years of Teaching Experience _______________ Subject(s) ________________

Directions: Please read each question carefully, think about your response, and answer each as honestly as you can.

1. What do you believe are the major reasons we use report cards and assign grades to students’ work?
   a. __________________________________________________________________
   b. __________________________________________________________________

2. Ideally, what purposes do you believe report cards or grades should serve?
   a. __________________________________________________________________
   b. __________________________________________________________________

3. Although classes certainly differ, on average, what percent of the students in your classes receive the following grades:
   A ____ B ____ C ____ D ____ E or F ____

4. What would you consider an ideal distribution of grades (in percent) in your classes?
   A ____ B ____ C ____ D ____ E or F ____

5. The current grading system in many schools uses the following combination of letter grades, percentages, and/or categories:
   A 100% - 90% Excellent Exceptional
   B 89% - 80% Good Proficient
   C 79% - 70% Average Basic
   D 69% - 60% Poor Below Basic
   E or F 59% - Failing

If you could make any changes in this system, what would they be?
   a. ____________________________________________________________________
   b. ____________________________________________________________________

6. Is there an established, uniform grading policy in your school or district?
   Yes ____ No _____ I don’t know _____

How well would you say you understand those policies?

Not at all Somewhat Very well

1 2 3 4 5
7. Grades and other reporting systems serve a variety of purposes. Based on your beliefs, rank order the following purposes from 1 (Most important) to 6 (Least important).

___ Communicate information to parents about students’ achievement and performance in school
___ Provide information to students for self-evaluation
___ Select, identify, or group students for certain educational programs (Honor classes, etc.)
___ Provide incentives for students to learn
___ Document students’ performance to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs
___ Provide evidence of students’ lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility

8. Teachers use a variety of elements in determining students’ grades. Among those listed below, please indicate those that you use and about what percent (%) each contributes to students’ grades.

___ Major examinations
___ Major compositions
___ Unit tests
___ Class quizzes
___ Reports or projects
___ Student portfolios
___ Exhibits of students’ work
___ Laboratory projects
___ Students’ notebooks or journals
___ Classroom observations
___ Other (Describe) __________________________
___ Other (Describe) __________________________

9. What are the most positive aspects of report cards and the process of assigning grades?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

10. What do you like least about report cards and the process of assigning grades?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

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