

RUNNING HEAD: Grading and Reporting

Determining Fair Grades for Students with Special Needs:

A Standards-Based Model

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Grades, report cards, and other progress reports are important vehicles for communicating with families about their children's strengths, areas to target, and interventions that can be used at home. For families of children with disabilities, accurate information on learning progress is essential for understanding intervention effectiveness and making placement decisions. Of all required components of the Individualized Education Program, however, educators struggle most with progress monitoring and reporting. The current emphasis on standards-based grading has intensified the challenge of determining fair and accurate grades for students with disabilities. In this article, the authors present a five-step process for linking IEP goals to general curriculum standards and reporting student learning in a format that is clear and meaningful for families.

Determining Fair Grades for Students with Special Needs:

A Standards-Based Grading Model

One of the most important functions of grades and report cards is to give families information on their children's progress in school. Families need to know their children's strengths, areas where they are struggling, and what can be done at home to promote success. Recognizing the need for meaningful progress reporting, many schools have begun implementing "standards-based" grading and reporting practices (Guskey, 2001). Rather than reducing information on student learning to a single letter grade for each subject, standards-based grading allows teachers to report information on individual elements of learning. This level of detail is especially important to families of children with disabilities for whom pivotal placement and intervention decisions hinge on this information. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and 2004 recognizes this critical need and requires that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams plan and document how progress will be monitored and communicated for students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1414(d) (1) (A)). Despite this legal provision and widespread agreement on its importance, evidence indicates there is less compliance with progress monitoring than with any other IEP component (Etscheidt, 2006).

Challenges to Grading Students in Special Education

There has been a marked increase in recent years in both the number of students included in regular education classes as well as the amount of time they spend there (Handler, 2003). Although there is a wealth of research indicating the positive effects of including students with disabilities in regular education classrooms (e.g., Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Carlberg &

Kavale, 1980; Hunt, et al., 1994; Waldron, 1998), the process poses significant challenges to grading and reporting on the performance of students included in these general education classes. Is it best to report achievement on grade level standards, for example, or should grades be adapted? Should the grades be based on achievement only, or on effort, progress, or some combination of all three? For students with disabilities who receive much of their education outside the general education classroom, the special education teacher typically assigns the majority of the grades, while the general education teachers determine grades for the few subject areas in which students are fully included. For students with disabilities who are fully included in the general education classroom, however, the division of grading responsibilities is less clear (Bursuck, et al., 1996; Polloway et al., 1994).

A common strategy for grading students who are included involves the general education teacher taking responsibility for all areas on the regular report card, and the special education teacher taking responsibility for reporting on progress toward IEP goals. Although this seems a logical approach, deciding the appropriate grade for a general education content area can be very difficult, particularly if performance in the content area is affected by the disability.

Take, for example, an 8th grade student who is unable to demonstrate proficiency on the 8th grade standards because of multiple, severe disabilities, but has worked hard and progressed well toward IEP goals. On one hand, to fail such a student who has shown tremendous effort and progress clearly seems unfair. But on the other hand, giving passing marks to a student who has not yet met prescribed performance standards for that grade level also seems inappropriate. Further complicating this matter are the legal requirements of grading students with disabilities. Most notably, IEPs must “enable the child to achieve passing marks and advance from grade to grade” (Board of Education v. Rowley, 1982). Therefore, a failing grade for a student receiving

special education services is considered an indicator that appropriate educational services were not provided.

Grading Adaptations

Although increasing numbers of students are included in general education classrooms for greater portions of the day (Handler, 2003), little guidance or direction has come from the field of special education to help address the challenge of grading students in inclusive settings. Lacking explicit recommendations on grading students with disabilities who are included in general education classes, most regular classroom teachers make individual, informal grading adaptations for such students (Polloway et al., 1994). To aid teachers in this adaptation process and to promote consistency, a variety of grading adaptations have been recommended over the years. Grading adaptations are procedures for individualizing a grading system for a student with disabilities (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005). Such adaptations generally fit within five categories: a) considering progress on IEP goals; b) measuring improvement over past performance; c) prioritizing assignments or content differently; d) including indicators of behavior or effort in the grade; and e) modifying the weights or scales for grading (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005). For example, a student with a disability, if judged the same way as class peers, may have demonstrated C-level proficiency in social studies for the grading period. The teacher could implement a grading adaptation by giving extra points if the student surpassed IEP goals or exerted high effort. Theoretically, these adaptations provide encouragement and opportunities for success to students for whom grade level standards may not be attainable. In reality, however, these adapted grades can lead such students to believe that their grades are not the result of what they do, but who they are. This, in turn, may actually decrease their motivation

(Ring & Reetz, 2000). Grading adaptations also introduce issues of unfairness (Bursuck, Munk, & Olson, 1999). And furthermore, even with these adaptations, most students in special education continue to receive low passing grades, placing them at high risk for low self-esteem and dropping out of school (Donahue & Zigmond, 1990).

Implications of Standards-Based Grading

The shift to standards-based grading and reporting has further complicated grading students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms. Although grading all students in special education on the basis of grade-level standards is inappropriate, most of the practices recommended to date are not well-suited to a standards-based grading system. When teachers must base their grades on specific learning standards, the meaning of the grade changes from a general overall assessment of learning (e.g., How did this student perform in science?) to a much more detailed description of students' performance on a discrete set of skills (e.g., How well did the student master the ability to classify minerals based on multiple physical criteria?). When the primary question addressed in assigning a grade shifts to the level of mastery of a particular learning standard, teachers are likely to find the task of grading students with disabilities much more troublesome (Thurlow, 2002). To provide meaningful and interpretable indicators of achievement that are useful for making accurate decisions about students in special education, more effective grading practices are sorely needed.

Setting a Solid Foundation

Before considering grading methods specific to students in special education, schools must have high a quality grading and reporting system in place for all students. Thoughtful and

well-reasoned grading policies can address many of the problems schools face with special education grading. One key component to a quality grading and reporting system requires teachers to consider three distinct types of learning criteria:

- *Product criteria* relate to students' specific achievements or level of performance based on examinations, final reports, projects, or portfolios, and overall assessments of learning.
- *Process criteria* relate to students' effort, class behavior, or work habits. They also might include evidence from daily work, regular classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, or punctuality of assignments.
- *Progress criteria* relate to how much students gain from their learning experiences. Teachers who use progress criteria typically look at how far students have come rather than where students are (Guskey, 1996, 2006; Guskey & Jung, 2006).

Most teachers base their grading on some combination of these three types of criteria (Brookhart, 1993; Frary, Cross, & Weber, 1993). The majority of teachers also vary the criteria they employ from student to student, taking into account individual circumstances (Truog & Friedman, 1996). Although teachers do so in an effort to be fair, the result is a "hodgepodge" grade (Brookhart, 1991; Cizek, Fitzgerald, & Rachor, 1996; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002) that is difficult for parents to interpret (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995). An *A*, for example, may mean that the student knew what the teacher expected before instruction began (product), didn't learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or made significant improvement (progress).

High quality grading and reporting systems establish clear indicators of product, process, and progress criteria, and then report each *separately* (Guskey, 1994; Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins, 1996). In other words, teachers separate grades or marks for achievement from those for

homework, effort, work habits, or learning progress. Schools that have implemented such systems find it actually makes grading easier. Teachers gather no more information, but no longer debate how best to combine these diverse types of information into a single grade. Teachers also report that students take homework, effort, and other work habits more seriously when they are reported separately (Guskey, 2006). Parents generally prefer this approach because it gives them more detailed and prescriptive information about their children's learning. For students in special education, it means that not only do families receive specific information on their children's achievement but also the meaningful information on progress and effort needed to make key intervention and placement decisions.

Inclusive Grading Model

Once a high-quality grading and reporting system is in place that separates product, process, and progress learning goals, schools can develop appropriate policies and practices for grading students with disabilities who are included in a standards-based learning environment. The five-step Inclusive Grading Model presented in Figure 1 is designed to fit a standards-based grading and reporting system and meet legal requirements for reporting progress of students who have IEPs. The five steps of the model consist of (1) Determine if no adaptation, an *accommodation*, or a *modification* is needed for each grade level standard, (2) Establish the appropriate modified standard for each area requiring *modification*, (3) Outline any additional goals pertinent to the child's academic success, (4) Apply equivalent grading practices to the appropriate standards, and (5) Clearly communicate the grades' meaning. Let's consider each of these steps in detail.

Step 1: Determine if No Adaptation, Accommodation, or Modification is Needed

Each student who qualifies for special education must have an IEP that outlines a specific plan of individualized annual goals and instructional strategies and adaptations needed for the student to reach these goals. Each student's IEP team meets at least once per year to discuss progress and to update the IEP. For most students who qualify for special education, adaptations are needed to provide them with access to the general education curriculum. By explicitly connecting adaptation needs to the general curriculum standards, IEP teams can set the stage for meaningful grading and reporting. Considering each grade level standard individually, teams should decide whether no adaptation, an *accommodation*, or a *modification* is needed.

Adaptations that provide access to the general curriculum but do not fundamentally alter the grade level standard are known as *accommodations* (Freedman, 2005). For example, a high-school student who has a learning disability in the area of written expression may require an audiotape of science lectures due to difficulty in taking notes. Because of the learning disability, this student also may need to be administered exams orally. Although the format for answering questions on exams is different in this case, the content of the questions and the substance of responses remains the same. Therefore, achievement on the grade level standard in science is what should be reported.

Some students receiving special education need curricular adaptations that are more substantial than accommodations. For these students, some or all of the grade level standards may not be achievable during the academic year, and curricular *modifications* are needed. A modification is an adaptation to the curriculum that fundamentally alters the grade level expectation (Freedman, 2005). For example, an IEP team may determine that a 4th grade student who has a severe math learning disability will not be able to achieve the 4th grade math standards

that academic year. For this student, the math curriculum will need to be modified to provide opportunities with math content that are appropriate for the student's present level of development. These modifications would then be noted in the IEP.

Step 2: Establish Standards for Modified Areas

For the 4th grade student in the above example, communicating failure on the grade level math standards provides no meaningful information about that student's achievement or progress. Instead, the IEP team must determine a modified standard that this child will be able to achieve with appropriate special education services. Modified standards should be clearly linked to the grade level standard and recorded on the IEP as an annual goal with short-term objectives. A child with mental retardation, for example, may not be ready to work on 3rd grade science standards in mineral identification. The IEP team may choose to develop science standards on the skill of sorting and classifying that are fundamentally related to the 3rd grade science standards but also developmentally appropriate for the student. For areas requiring these types of modification, achievement on the modified standards is what should be graded and reported.

Step 3: Determine the Need for Additional Goals

For some students receiving special education, there may be additional IEP goals that are pertinent to the student's development but extend beyond the general curriculum. A student with visual impairment, for example, may have orientation and mobility goals as a part of the IEP. Being able to walk independently from the classroom to the lunchroom, to outside, and so forth, for this student is important to being a part of the class. Although this goal may not be included within the structure of the regular report card, monitoring and reporting on this goal are

important. Schools should continue to provide this information on a regular basis through a report card supplement so that families and others on the team are able to make decisions based on the child's progress and achievement. This is true even though there are no longer specific federal legal requirements for frequency of reporting progress on IEP goals (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2005).

Step 4: Apply Fair and Equitable Grading Practices to Appropriate Standards

Once schools have a high quality grading and reporting system in place that makes clear the purpose of grading and offers guidance on *how* to grade, IEP teams can apply general grading practices to the standards appropriate for students with disabilities. For most students, including those in special education, the standards being measured are the grade level standards. In subject areas in which only accommodations are needed, unless otherwise noted on the IEP, students receiving special education should receive grades according to the same criteria as every other student in the class with no penalty for accommodation. A student who takes a history test orally, for example, should be graded based on the content of his or her responses. The grade should not be lowered because of the response format. However, it also should not be raised based on effort, progress, or any other factor that is not a part of every other student's grade.

For subject areas in which modified standards are used, grades should be based on the modified standard, not the grade level standard. From the example above, the student who has mental retardation and is working toward a lower level sorting and classifying science standard should be assigned a grade based on that modified standard. Measuring and reporting progress on a standard the IEP team has already agreed to be unattainable would be meaningless and, arguably, illegal.

Step 5: Communicate the Meaning of the Grades

By providing information on students' specific achievements, separate from indicators of progress and effort, and then clearly communicating the meaning of each grade assigned, educators can offer families much better information about children's learning success. If some or all of the grades for achievement are based on modified standards, then the reporting system must include additional information to ensure that families understand their child's success is based on work appropriate for their development level, not their assigned grade level. Assigning grades based on modified standards without communicating what was truly measured is no more meaningful or fair than giving failing grades based on grade level standards. . Schools might include a column on the report card each grading period in which special notations can be marked. Or a superscript letter or an asterisk could simply be added to the grade or mark to indicate that it is based on modified standards. The accompanying footnote might then state, "Based on modified standards" and direct the reader to the standards on which it was based.

By law, however, the notation on the report card or transcript cannot, in any way, identify the student as receiving special education services. For example, the wording "modified standard" is a legal notation if modifications are available to all students, but "special education goals" and "IEP goals" are not. An accompanying report might include the IEP goals or a narrative of information based on the IEP.

Conclusion

Educators desperately need clear and meaningful guidance in developing grading and reporting policies and practices for students with disabilities who are included in general

education classes. They also need concise and unambiguous data on the effects of such policies and practices. While some grading adaptations have been studied in terms of their perceived fairness to teachers and students, additional evidence is needed to determine the effectiveness of various adaptations for grading the performance of students with special needs. For example: Do families understand their children's progress? Can IEP teams use grades to make data-based decisions on the efficacy of interventions? Can schools use the information to determine whether a child has made adequate progress to advance to the next grade?

Separating product, process, and progress learning goals, and then situating achievement grades within the context of accommodations and modifications, offers a promising alternative to modified grading within a standards-based environment. The IEP documents curricular accommodations and modifications for students who receive special education. After considering the accommodation and modification needs of students, IEP teams can determine for each content area whether students are to be held to the grade level standards or modified standards. If the team modifies particular standards they judge to be inappropriate for the student, then no further grading adaptations are needed. Achievement or product grades need not be adjusted by considering progress, effort, work habits, or other behaviors. Process and progress indicators remain an important part of grading and reporting, but are kept separate from indicators of students' achievement of specific learning standards. By reporting product, progress, and process goals separately, inaccurate grades based an arbitrary mix of grading elements or on inappropriate standards can be eliminated. As a result, students with disabilities and their families can have information that they are able to interpret and use.

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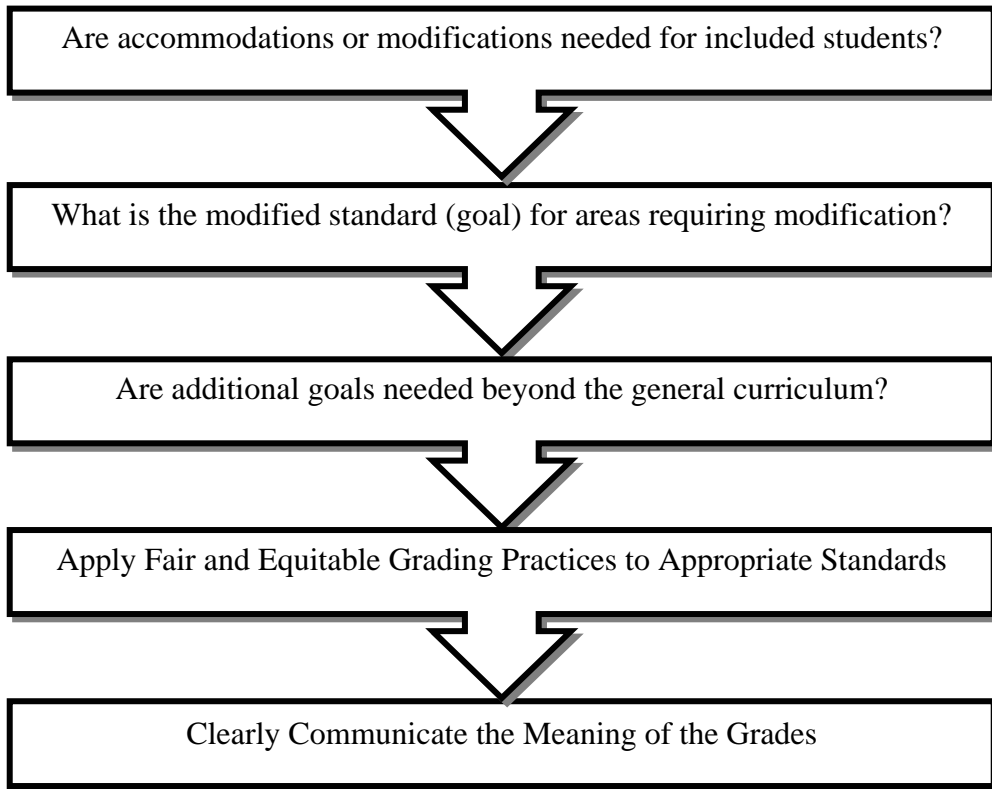


Figure 1. Inclusive Grading Model