

WHAT IS A GRADE? Part 3
Susan Bell, Superintendent of Schools
Windsor Locks Public Schools

This is Part 3 of a 4-part series on the subject of grading in public schools

Why are grades in Windsor Locks not “averaged” anymore?

Averaging is a practice that takes multiple numbers representing the grades students earned on different assignments that they completed over the course of a marking period and represents them as one number which serves as the student’s overall grade in the class. As you saw in the example in Part 1, the student’s grades for the quarter were averaged together to arrive at the grade of 70 for the quarter.

Let’s say, however, for arguments’ sake, that the standards on which the student is being graded are different from one another. Take, for example, the standards a student is trying to master in Unit 8 of our grade 8/9 Algebra 1 class, Quadratic Functions and Equations:

- Standard 1: For a function that models a relationship between 2 quantities, interpret key features of graphs and tables in terms of the quantities, and sketch the graphs showing key features given a verbal description of the relationship.
- Standard 2: Use the process of factoring and completing the square in a quadratic function to show zeros, extreme values, and symmetry of the graph, and interpret these in terms of a context.

*Even if we just focus on the expected outcome of each, as identified above in bold print, **interpreting key features of graphs and tables** is a much **DIFFERENT** skill than **using the process of factoring and completing the square in a quadratic function**. Ultimately, the skills incorporate the concept of graphing, but the two skills are distinctly different. Each of these standards are identified as “Power Standards” in the Quadratic Functions and Equations unit, which means they are standards that our teachers in Windsor Locks have deemed the most important to be assessed and mastered by the end of the unit. Each of these is only part of the overarching concept of Quadratic functions and equations, and Quadratic functions and equations are only a part of what makes up a student’s knowledge base in Algebra 1. If both of these standards are building blocks to students mastering the concepts of Quadratic functions and equations, which is a critical component of the Algebra 1 body of knowledge, then students **MUST** be assessed in this specific standards and be given specific feedback relative to how they can improve in those standards. The feedback a teacher gives to a student on Standard one will most likely not be the same feedback they provide the student for standard two, given that the skills are distinctly different.*

Providing a student with feedback relative to each of these standards is a much different approach than giving a student an averaged grade for Algebra 1. While the student may have received a C (or, let’s say, an averaged numerical grade of 70), all that information tells the student and the teacher is that the student is performing at a C level – they are doing ok, maybe not by their parent’s standards, but ok. But there’s absolutely no information in that grade on what standards they are growing in, and which ones they are struggling to master. Instead, the student has a C, and so conceivably, they are missing something; potentially, 30% of the overall content and skills necessary to have mastered the standards that have been blurred by the reporting of an average.

It’s a travesty in education that has long been overlooked – one that we are striving to correct. An overall grade in a subject ends up being an evaluation of the **student**, instead of feedback on the **student’s growth towards mastering standards**. The reporting of an averaged grade is final – there’s no going back. The reporting of progress in the form of standards-based grading gives targeted information to the student and parent that in standard one I am mastering the standard and in Standard two, I am progressing. For the teachers working with that student, they now have a very clear picture on how to target additional support. That’s our job. Ongoing assessment and feedback to students on their growth is an essential element of helping each student increase their academic achievement.