Equitable Grading:

A Competency-Based Education Entry Point and Core Practice

Joe Feldman, Author of Grading for Equity, and CEO, Crescendo Education Group

Dr. Sonal Patel, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, San Leandro Unified, CA

Dr. Jill Gurtner, Principal, with students Everest and Kamu from Clark Street Community School, WI

Laurie Gagnon, *Competency*Works Director, Aurora Institute, Moderator

December 17, 2024

Aurora Institute acknowledges that this virtual webinar takes place on lands that have been home to Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. By focusing on the whole child, real-world application, and learning in context, competency-based education (CBE) uses similar principles to traditional Indigenous education. Whether intentional or not in the initial design, we acknowledge that CBE ideas reflect traditional Indigenous education approaches that long pre-date CBE. We want to take a moment to honor the ancestral grounds that we are collectively gathered upon and support the resilience and strength that Indigenous people have shown worldwide. Specifically, we reflect on the impact of colonization on Indigenous Peoples through education systems that marginalized and suppressed their traditional knowledge systems and ways of being.

Explore native land maps:
https://native-land.ca

Introduce yourself in the chat!

Share your:

- Name
- Role
- Org
- Location
- One memory about a grade you got

Meeting Invitations

- Bring good intentions & pay attention to impact
- Engage with agency and an open mind
- Accept and expect non-closure
- Have fun while doing good work

The mission of the Aurora Institute is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all.

Vision Setting & Shifting Mental Models

Creating & Advancing Student-Centered Policies

Developing & Amplifying New Knowledge

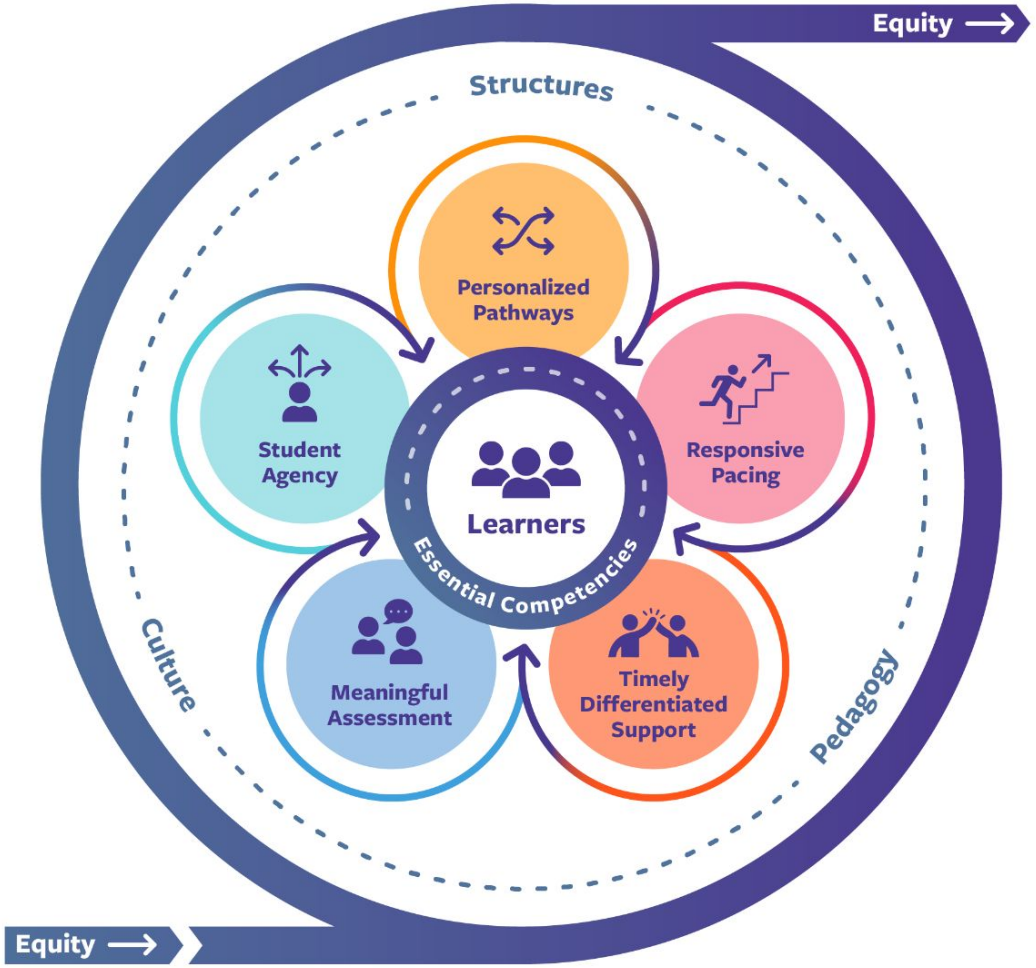
Catalyzing Change & Field Building

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Antiracism

Grading & Competency-Based Education

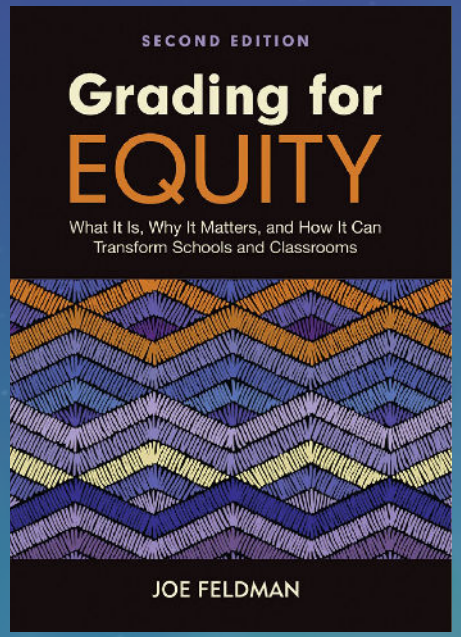
- Students are Empowered Daily
- Meaningful Assessment
- Timely, Differentiated Support
- Progress Based on Mastery
- Learn Actively With Varied Pathways and Pacing
- Equity Strategies Drive Culture, Structures, and Pedagogy

- **Establish Rigorous, Common Expectations with Meaningful Competencies**

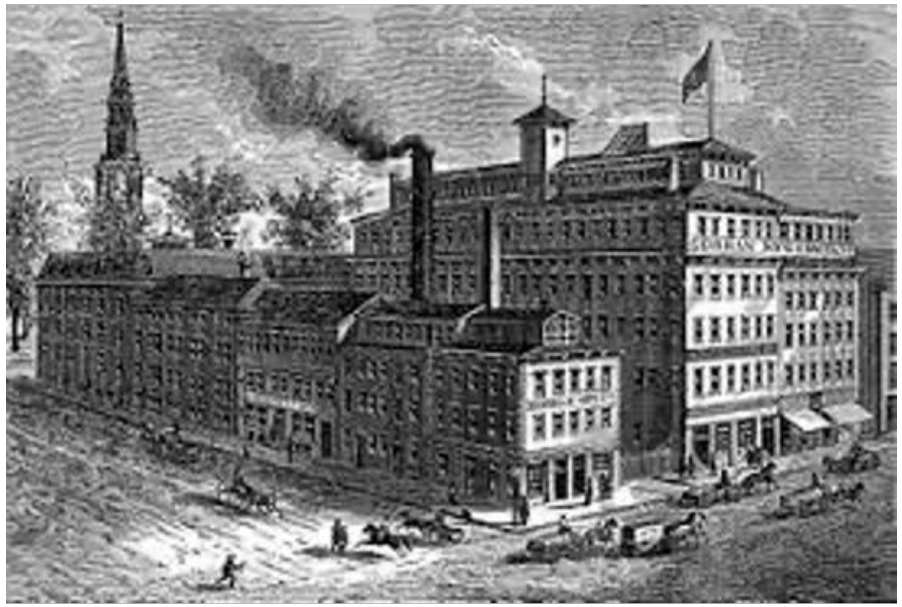


Grading for Equity

The research and the practice



A Brief History of Grading in the US…
…begins with
the Industrial Revolution



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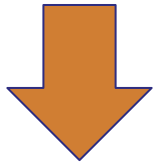
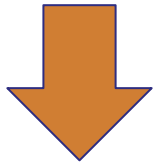
Impact of Traditional Grading

Opaque (hidden) expectations about learning



Success in school = accumulating maximum points (irrelevant of learning)



Students feel disempowered, stressed, and that school is a hustle for points

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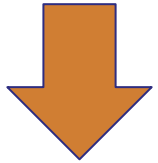
System-wide Impact of Traditional Grading

Omnibus Grading
(and variability among teachers)

Inaccurate and unreliable information about students' academic proficiency



Schools make incorrect assignment of supports and opportunities to students
Students are given misleading information about their readiness

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"Can We Trust the Transcript: Recognizing Student Potential Through More Accurate Grading" (2024)

Part 1: 33K+ pairings of students' end-of-course exam scores + S2 grades in those courses

Part 1 Findings:

- Nearly 60% of grades did not match objective test score
- Over 40% of grades were **inflated** (grade > test score)
- 1 out of 6 grades were **depressed** (grade < test score)

- **Students are being told false information about their readiness for next level—either setting up for future struggle or encouraging opt-out of opportunities**
- **Educators, parents, and college admissions staff are making decisions based on inaccurate and unreliable information**

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Three Pillars of Equitable Grading

- Grades are **ACCURATE** reflections of a student's academic performance
- Grades are **BIAS-RESISTANT**—counteract institutional biases and prevent our implicit biases from "infecting" our grades
- Grades are **MOTIVATIONAL**—builds students' intrinsic motivation (self-regulation) and sense of efficacy

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Equitable Grading Practices

Grade does NOT include:

- 0-100 percentage scale
- Averaging performance over time
- “Participation” and other student behaviors (including attendance, cheating, “effort”)
- Performance on homework/formative assessments
- Group grades
- Extra credit

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Equitable Grading Practices

Grade based only on academic performance

- Consider most recent performance
- Explicit learning outcomes
- Retakes and Redos
- 0-4 Scale
- Expanded use of formative feedback
- Rubrics and “standards scales” that describe gradations of outcome mastery

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"Can We Trust the Transcript: Recognizing Student Potential Through More Accurate Grading" (2024)

Part 2: Trained 263 teachers to implement equitable grading practices (23 hours during school year–coaching and workshops)

Part 2 Findings:

For students whose teachers were trained in equitable grading practices:

- Greater increase in match between test-score & Semester 2 grade compared to students taught by control group of teachers
- Greater reduction of grade inflation & grade depression
- Reduced rate of assigned D/F grades and A grades
- Greater reduction in achievement disparities for underserved groups
- 40% of teachers reported that the PD, alone, made them more likely to stay in the district

❖ **Addressing teachers' "knowledge gap" improves validity & reliability of grades**

❖ **Equipping teachers to grade more accurately and fairly is tool for teacher retention**

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10 Years of Equitable Grading: Our Partners (so far!)

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So How Can We Have More Equitable Grading?

- ❑ Book/Article Study
- ❑ GFE Online Course
- ❑ Workshops and Presentations
- ❑ Equitable Grading PLC
- ❑ Student Surveys
- ❑ Teacher generated data

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10 Years of Equitable Grading: Changes in Outcomes for **Students**

Quantitative Data: Same as 2024 study

- Reduced grade inflation & reduced grade depression
- Statistically significant increase in correlation between grades and standardized exam scores
- Reduction in achievement disparities

Qualitative Data:

- Persistence and motivation
- Less stressed and less focused on “points”
- Students describe their progress in language of the discipline–their strengths and areas to improve

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10 Years of Equitable Grading: Changes in Outcomes for **Schools and Districts**

- Post-partnership, 98% of teachers reported that their grading changes improved learning for every student
- Post-partnership, nearly ⅔ of partners made grading policy changes to ensure systemwide consistency, accuracy, and fairness

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Equitable Grading

leads to

Competency-Based Education

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Equitable Grading is NOT a set of "fixes", but leads to...

- ➔ How can my grading scale reflect mathematical soundness and levels of performance?
- ➔ How will I describe levels of performance and communicate those expectations?
- ➔ What are outcomes for my course (or competencies)? What do I want students to know and be able to do?

→ Competency-Based Education!

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CBE's large questions lead to specific strategies…

- ➔ What are outcomes for students in our district or school not in terms of units or seat time?
  - ◆ Portrait of a Graduate
- ➔ What kind of courses and curricula will prepare students for those outcomes?
- ➔ How will we teach, and assess, those outcomes?
- ➔ How will we describe and report students' places on their learning trajectories toward those outcomes, accurately and fairly?

→ Improved, Equitable Grading!

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San Leandro Unified School District

Sonal Patel, Ed.D

Assistant Superintendent

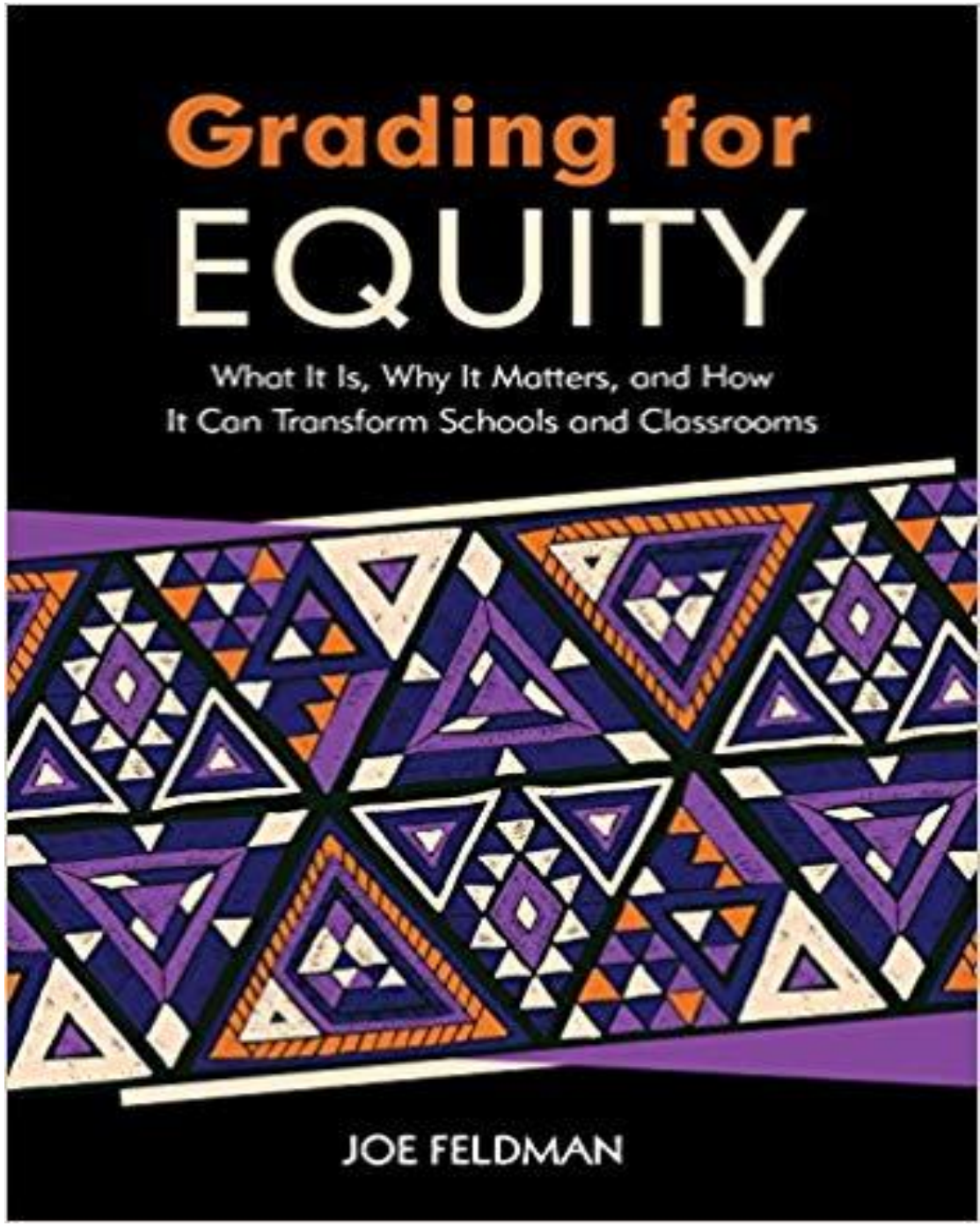
Our Equitable Grading Journey

This is slusd. us

The San Leandro Unified Journey

For the past 9 years, we have provided professional learning and engaged in policy work to build a strong foundation to address inequities in grading, which necessarily impacts teaching and learning.

Our aim as been to better support our teachers and students to ensure that grades accurately reflect student achievement in standards-based learning.



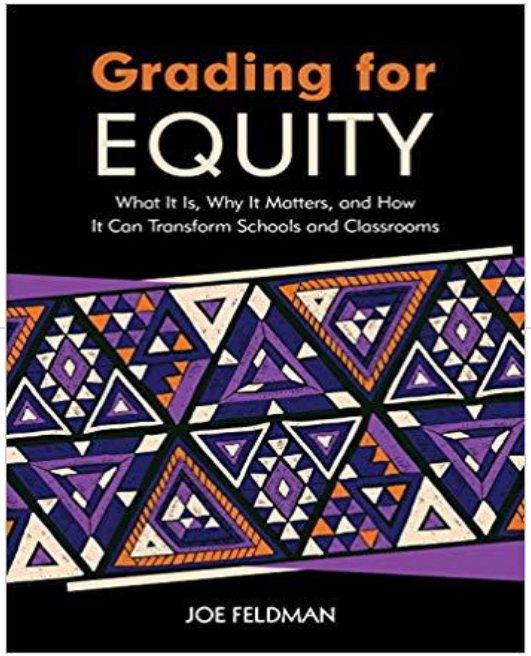
SLUSD Drivers & Lift

Secondary Schools Redesign Committee findings

Incorrect placements

High D/F rate

Inconsistency between course alikes



Need for professional learning on grading

Need for infrastructure to do things differently

Need for proactive policies

Need to address our past attempts and missteps

What are your current drivers or motivations to engage in equitable grading or grading for mastery?

Who shares these drivers with you?

(Jot notes for yourself or share in chat)

WORKSHOPS

- A day and a half kick off
- 6 half-day workshops throughout the year

INDIVIDUALIZED COACHING

- 15 minute sessions
- 6x during the year

ACTION RESEARCH

Teachers trying out:

- New practices
- Collecting data on impact
- Sharing and reflecting during the 6 workshops

“How can the PD design build capacity across many initiatives?

TECH

REVISE GRADEBOOK SYSTEMS and SUPPORT

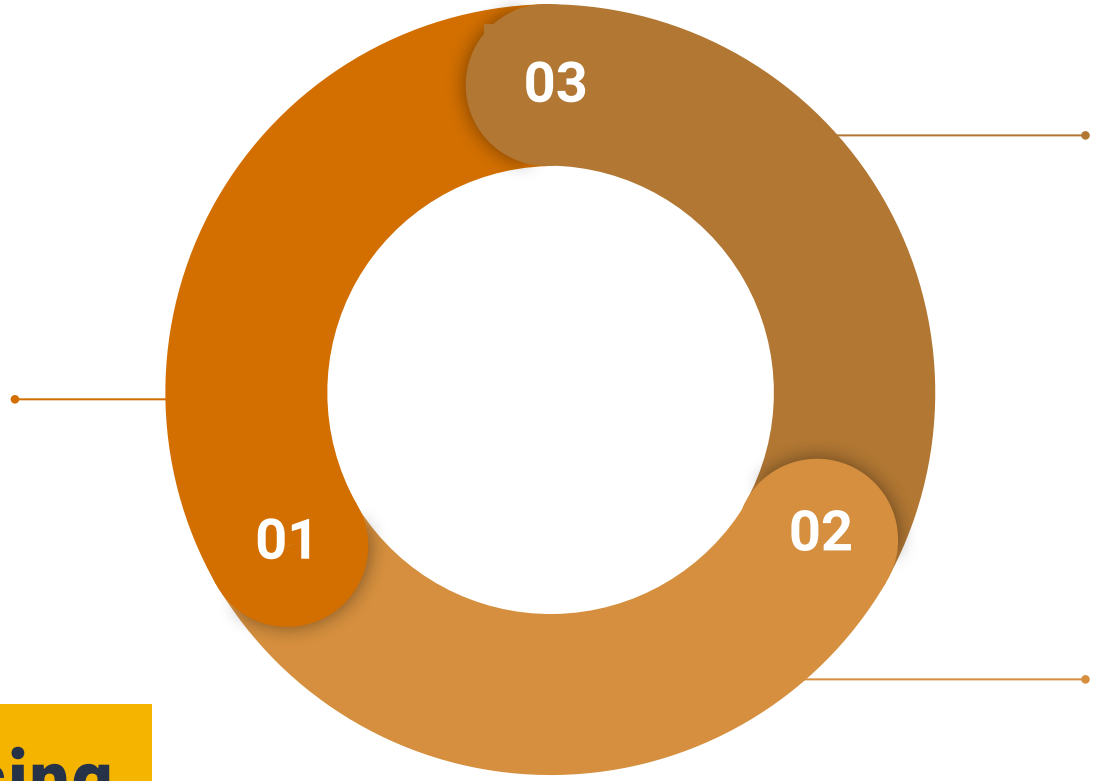
AERIES (SIS) gradebook setup favored 100 point model as well as many of our assessment systems.

DEPARTMENTS

CONDUCT SYLLABUS COLLECTION & REVIEW

Update our Course of Study templates and build routines for department heads to collect and review syllabi for cohesion and to identify need for training;

Teachers noticed lack of consistency in grading/assessment experiences for students within same course, subject area, grade



SCHEDULES

EMBED SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Provide time and space for retakes, rubric based grading and collaboration

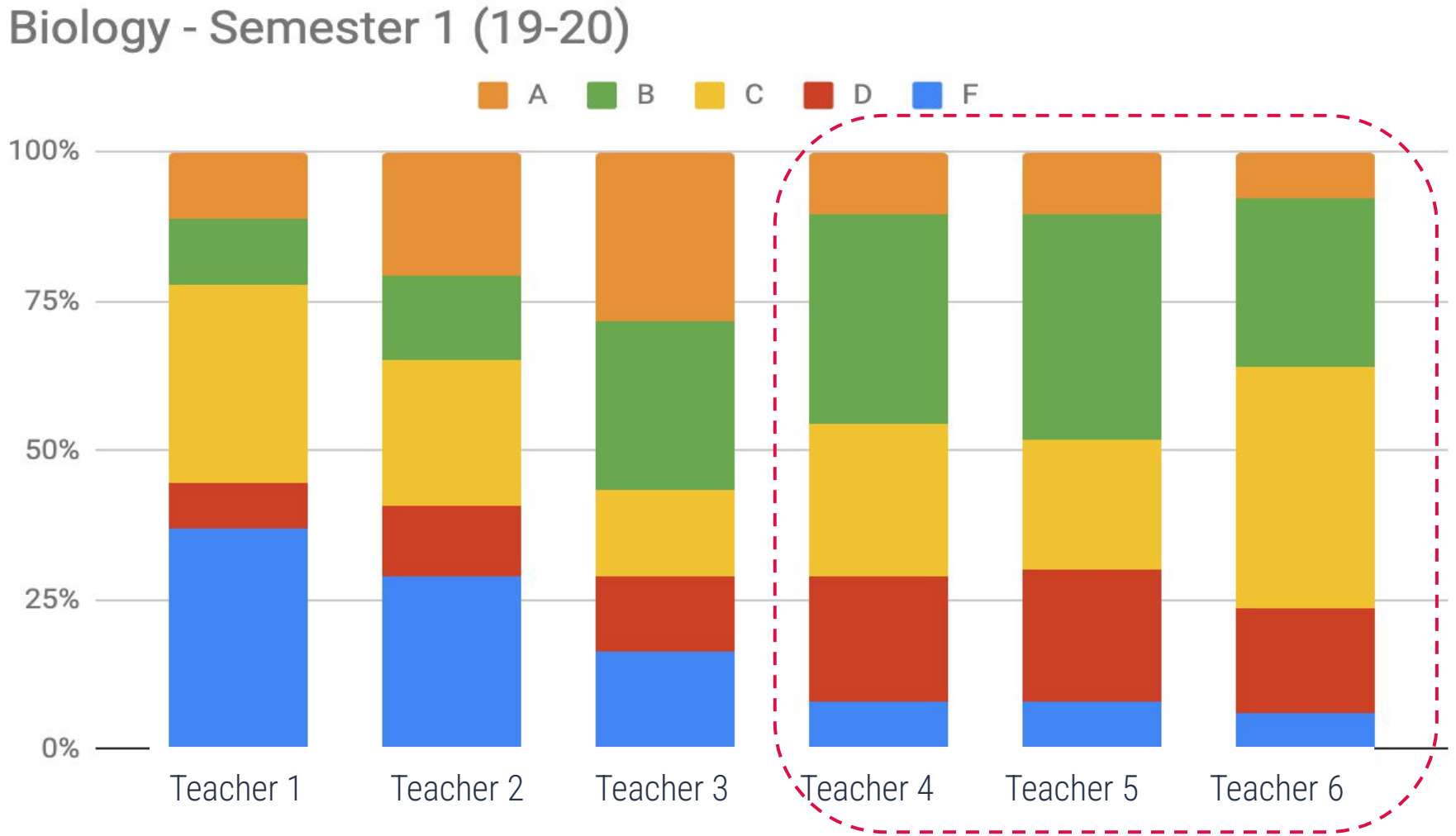
Are we progressing or shifting the burden?

“What demands on infrastructure do you or will you face?

(Jot notes for yourself or share in chat)

Administrative Regulation 5121: Grades/Evaluation of Student Achievement

“In order to ensure grades accurately reflect a student's academic understanding and achievement at the end of a course, teachers shall weigh the most recent demonstration of knowledge on a particular standard more heavily than earlier attempts or practice work. Teachers shall not include indicators of work habits or behavior such as lateness to class or in submission of work, bringing materials to class, perceived effort, attendance, classroom conduct and the like (these may be reported under "work habits" or "citizenship"). Additionally, to honor the learning process and continued motivation to learn, students shall be allowed to reassess a standard or revise a graded assignment within a reasonable timeframe. While collaborative work is encouraged for learning, a final grade shall be based on the individual student's demonstration of understanding.”


Biology - Semester 1 (19-20)
A
B
C
D
F
100%
75%
50%
25%
0%
Teacher 1
Teacher 2
Teacher 3
Teacher 4
Teacher 5
Teacher 6

Outcomes: Grading Mastery not Prep

"The formative/summative aspect has been life changing for, not just the students, but me. Students feel safer in their learning with low-stakes formative assignments (which barely affect their grade), and they are more prepared and invested in the summative piece that has come from all of the preparation leading up to it. This has been life-changing for me when it comes to assigning meaningful learning tasks and has helped in minimizing tedious grading. With the pandemic and students finding themselves less motivated or dealing with circumstances beyond their control, they know that if they successfully complete their summative assessments, they are showing mastery, therefore passing.."

-Alex Bright (English Teacher)

Outcomes: Motivation & Accuracy

"The 0-100 scale is disproportionately weighted toward failure. There are 6 different ways to describe failure and only 4 to describe a passing score. Furthermore a "zero" on an assignment in this sort of calculation holds far too much weight and can make it impossible for students to recover. This can affect the accuracy of a grade, a student who earns 100% on one assignment and 0% on the next will receive an F because averaging makes it a 50% [another non-equitable practice]. This can also affect student motivation, students know from their experiences that one or 2 "zeros" on a 0-100 scale of grading are nearly impossible to recover from, so if they can't see a way through, they may stop trying."

-Chris Love (former Science Teacher)

Outcomes: Non-punitive Practices

“Moving to the practices of Grading for Equity has made me much more informed about the English standards and what it really means to meet them. I have more meaningful conversations with students about the standards and how grades are not arbitrary points for effort, but directly reflect their knowledge of the ELA skills. There's room for second chances and redemption because of the 0-4 scale, accepting late work, and not assigning extra credit. Students understand where their grade is coming from and they don't give up just because they've missed out on "points." When I survey them about my grading policy, across the board they say that they appreciate the transparency. Their grade equals knowledge and skills instead of effort and behavior.”

-Savannah Barry (English Teacher)

Clark Street Community School

Different by Design

Because the Future Demands Different

Dr. Jill Gurtner, Principal
Everest and Kamu, Students

Public charter school co-located with traditional high school in the Middleton Cross Plains Area School District in Wisconsin.

The Mission of Clark Street Community School is to democratically cultivate a community of engaged learners, serve as a resource for educators, and a catalyst for reform in education throughout our region and our nation.

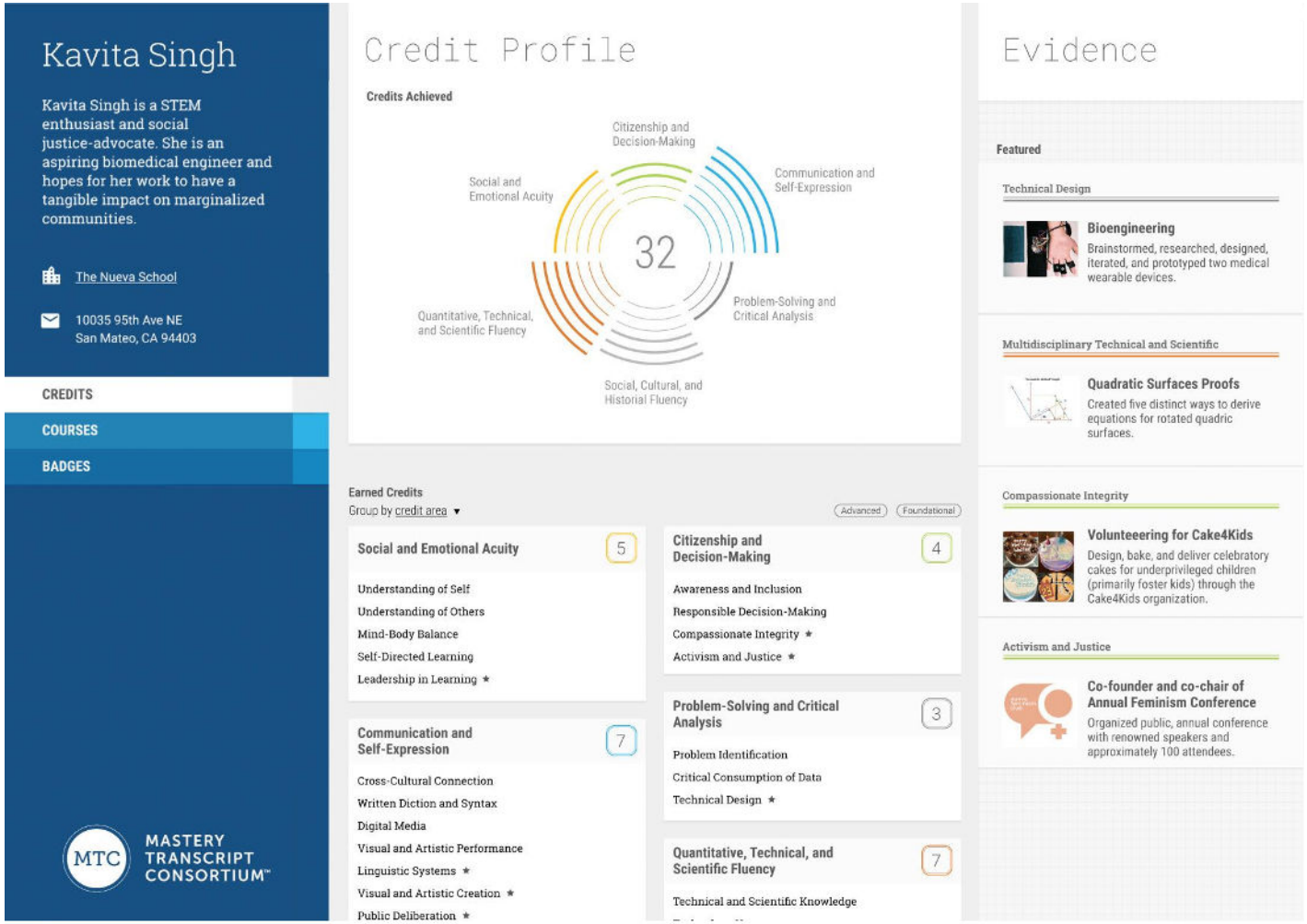
Learner Centered Design

- Learner Agency
- Socially-Embedded
- Personalized, Relevant, Contextualized
- Open-Walled
- Competency-Based

Assessment and Reporting

Equitable (Liberatory) Assessment through Competency-Based Education

- **Students capturing and telling their story through the Mastery Transcript.**
- **Consistency and Transparency through school wide common rubrics.**
- **Assessment as learning through regular feedback and revision cycles.**



"Through many rounds of peer and teacher feedback, I was able to turn a piece of work I hated into something I am proud of."

"Competency-based learning provided me the confidence and skills to present in front of a large audience. I was able to receive invaluable feedback on my work through our unique feedback process. Without the feedback process my project went through, I wouldn't have been able to produce the high-quality work that I accomplished."

Q&A

Check it out!

bit.ly/GFE-StudyTour

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Reflection & Closing

- Please take a minute to fill out our brief survey that will appear when the webinar closes!
- Join us on January 30 for our next webinar!

Stay Connected

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