PRINCIPAL CENTER RADIO

TRANSCRIPT

THOMAS R. GUSKEY

Announcer: Welcome to Principal Center Radio, helping you build capacity for instructional leadership. Here's your host director of The Principal Center Dr. Justin Baeder.

Dr. Justin Baeder: Welcome everyone to Principal Center Radio. I'm your host Justin Baeder and I'm honored to be joined today by Dr. Thomas. Dr. Guskey is a renowned expert on assessment and standards-based grading and he's a fellow of the American Educational Research Association. He's also the author of more than 25 books including On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting and his new book Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems. And now our feature presentation. Tom, welcome to Principal Center Radio.

Dr. Tom Guskey: Thank You, Justin. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

JB: Well, it's been fascinating to follow your work throughout your career on assessment and grading and reporting. And we know that the work of modernizing or updating our grading and reporting practices and philosophies and systems is ongoing. It's something that we never seem to be where we ultimately envision. What do you see happening with assessment and grading and reporting across our profession that prompted you to write this new book?

TG: Well, I think today there's a great press among educators at all levels to make sure that there's consistency within our educational programs. By that I mean looking at the learning goals—the curriculum—we set out to have students learn well, the instructional activities that are provided where teachers design experiences for students in classrooms, how we assess that learning, and then how we grade or report that learning. There's been historically not a great alignment between those four elements, so I think that this whole notion of being standards-based is designed to help educators see that those four elements really need to be aligned and there needs to be consistency across those in schools and classrooms at all levels.

JB: And over the past decade or so we've seen a raft of new standards come through the pipeline. And I know the common core standards were, of course,

probably the most visible aspect of that reform. The next-gen science standards perhaps one of the most ambitious sets of changes, if not as well known, and yet our grading and reporting systems often are very unchanged and are very kind of, you know, did you do your work? Did you turn your work in on time? Did you answer all the questions? We're often addressing an outdated set of goals with our assessment systems. So in schools and in districts that have not really changed anything, what do you see as some of the big challenges and, as you said, misalignments between those factors and what do you see as some of the biggest opportunities for a school that basically is just using the same old traditional grading and reporting systems?

TG: Okay, well you're absolutely right. Grading is kind of the last element of those four that educators take on. In the early 2000s, we began to recognize the need for there being clarity in the learning goals—what it is we want the students going to be able to do as a result of their experiences in school. And so they offered opportunities for those standards to be established. But what we discovered quickly was that as different states for establishing standards the rigor and the challenge associated with the student learning associated with those standards vary greatly. That led different professional organizations to really address that challenge and try to establish some consistency in those standards overall.

The first major effort was that you mentioned led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers where they recognized that the standards been established by the different states were so drastically different. So they brought leaders in the fields of language arts and mathematics together to try to establish some sort of consistent set of standards that all could agree to and advocate for their schools. And that led to the development of Common Core. We sort of extended that work with professional organizations in science and social studies to develop the next-gen standards there. So we sort of took onto the clarification of what we wanted students are going to be able to do first.

That then led to the sort of combined approach. How can we alter our teaching practices to help students acquire that particular knowledge and skill? And then

the assessments that accompany that. Moving toward assessments that were more authentic and more directly aligned with the kinds of higher-level skills those standards advocated. Grading is the last. It's the one that we've sort of put to the side and of all, it is the one that has remained unchanged for the longest period of time. Most of what we do in grading today is based on tradition not based on our knowledge base of what we know works. So I think that it's only now that educators are turning to that seriously and looking at what we do with grading and how can we make sure it aligns with the other developments in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

JB: I wonder if what you just shared with us, Tom, explains why often people who get fired up about you know changing the report card or changing the reporting system—if that's the only piece that's changing, they might encounter a lot of confusion, a lot of resistance, a lot of frustration. What's the most promising path or the best starting point? We do have the new standards. We are talking about new instructional strategies, better pedagogy, and hopefully improving assessment as well. But for leaders who are just feeling a little bit stuck or like they have trouble getting other people on board with the idea of updating our grading and reporting systems, what are some ways to get unstuck?

TG: One of the biggest issues and I guess the major premise of the book on Get Set, Go! we talk about implementation strategies is to help readers understand that many of these reform efforts have failed because leaders have focused primarily on what they wanted to change. They wanted to change the report card and they wanted to change the sort of system by which they're recording this information and haven't adequately addressed the concerns of the stakeholders in a system. And their concerns generally relate to why issues.

Why are you doing this in the first place? What's wrong with the old system? Typically parents and board members grew up under a system of very traditionally based grading and they were quite successful in it. They don't see any problems in that system at all. So the first task is for school leaders to step back and be able to defend—in very clear ways— why they feel that it's necessary to change grading, what's wrong with the current system, why aren't these traditions working anymore, and what is it that we could do to change them that

can actually benefit students and not diminish their other things from which they're truly interested in, like getting into college and being prepared for the kinds of demands they are going to see when they leave school. So I think that not recognizing that we need to address the why concerns of stakeholders first before dealing with the what. That would be a major positive step in the right direction.

JB: Yeah. And I think that lack of a "why" could explain in a lot of cases why this is a battle that many leaders choose not to pick. You know, with lacking that "why" we'd much rather deal with something that we don't have to do so much convincing and enlisting people in. So what are some of the key student-facing problems that new attention to grading and reporting can address? What are some of the big problems that would impact students that really give us that "why"?

TG: Well one of the things that we know from the research evidence that has been gathered on grading over the last century. And in 2016 the American Educational Research Association was celebrating its 100th anniversary. As a part of that celebration, they put out a call to the entire research community asking them to propose, sort of, syntheses of research in different areas.

So together with a friend and colleague of mine, Susan Brookhart, we put together a team to look at the best 100 years of research on grading. We were surprised, I guess, as we got into this to find out how much we know about grading, how long we've known it, and how little of that has translated into practice. We're kind of convinced with this experience that there's not another area in education where there's a larger gap between our knowledge base in our practice and there is in the area of grading.

We find that many of these typical grading practices remain in use because they've never been thought about deeply. For example, grading students based on the relative standing among classmates versus grading students according to learning criteria.

We call it grading on the curve, you know, versus meaning accredited criteria

there's probably not another area in all of the research where it's more confirming than this that we really need to grade students according to what they learn and what they are able to do and not according to their standing among classmates. That when you grade according to those norm-based criteria it, number one, makes learning very competitive for kids. They have to compete against each other for the few scarce high grades the teacher is going to give out. It diminishes any sense of collaboration because when students help each other, helping someone else hurts your chances for success. It actually changes the relationship of teachers because when a teacher is helping one student they are not helping others and so they are interfering with the competition.

If we grade students according to criteria though all those disappear. Now you have a pretty good idea of what the students are learning or able to do because it's based on those criteria. It enhances collaboration among students because helping someone else doesn't hurt your chances for success—it might even enhance them. And it changed the relationship of teachers to students. So there's still competition, but the competition is with the curriculum. And so the teachers and the students are on the same side. And I think that just moving in that direction—but again it means helping parents understand why.

Often times a typical question for parents is, how is my kid doing compared to his classmates, or her classmates, or everyone else in the room? And to help parents understand it we're just not interested in that anymore. And what we're doing is saying here is how your kid is doing compared to these rigorous expectations we've set for their learning in this course or at this level. And changing the whole dynamic in that conversation to move it toward a criterion-based versus a norm-based orientation.

JB: And let's talk about how to recognize that because I think a lot of people would say, "oh no we don't grade on a curve. Maybe when I was in college I had some professors who graded on a curve, but that's such an antiquated idea nobody really does that anymore. But I have to tell you I was in a high school principal's office pretty recently and, you know, often you can kind of get a sense of the priorities and the philosophy from what's written on the principal's whiteboard, you know, their own planning whiteboard. And I saw a note in this prin-

cipal's office about grade Inflation and kind of a little bell curve graph you know ABCDF and you know the philosophy embedded in that quick annotation on the whiteboard—that we should have most students getting Cs, fewer students getting Ds and Bs, and very few students getting Fs and As. And those should be about the same.

And it was jarring for me to see that because again, in conversation, we never say those things. We don't say I believe that most students should get Cs and hardly anybody should get As. It's just the bell curve like we need to make sure that education and you know that education reproduces the bell curve and that grades are distributed according to the bell curve. Like nobody really says that and yet the philosophies are embedded there as you said. It shows up in our expectations about what percentage of students should master standards.

You know, we think of it as a problem if everybody gets a hundred percent on the math test. We think of it as a problem if everybody gets an A+ on their term paper. Like clearly we've done something wrong in terms of rigor. So even in cases where we don't philosophically say outright that we want to grade on the curve, we want to force students into a bell curve distribution we're still doing some of these things that reproduce that pattern totally unnecessarily. Help me understand that so what are some of the more insidious manifestations of that philosophy that are socially acceptable that we allow to pass through our conversations unchallenged?

TG: That's such a good point, Justin. You're absolutely right. We find that this sort of normal curve mentality is so ingrained in our society. But I always go—back to my mentor and chair of my doctoral dissertation committee was Benjamin Bloom. And early on in his writing, Bloom addressed this issue specifically. He said if you think of that normal curve, it is really the distribution of randomly occurring events when nothing intervenes.

If we did an experiment in some natural phenomena like agriculture where you deal with crop yield, you would expect a normal distribution. Some fields are very fertile and give you a high yield and others are infertile, low-yield. Most cluster around the center. But if you intervene in that process, say that you add

fertilizer, what you would hope is to get a distribution of crop very different from the normal curve. You want to push all the fields up to the high end and giving you a high yield. And in fact, if the distribution of crop yield after your intervention it still looks like the normal curve, that's the degree to which your intervention has failed. It's made no difference and then he turned around and said, you know what? Teaching is an intervention. Teaching is a purposeful and intentional act. And if the distribution of achievement after you teach looks like the normal curve, that's the degree to which you have failed. You have made no difference. And so that's why it's getting beyond that mentality.

I always find it ironic that if a teacher has a lot of the students getting high grades instead of us saying, "Oh that's wonderful you're such a great teacher. You've been able to help all of your students master these important skills." What we say instead is, that mentality, to say that we need to be rigorous, we need to be demanding, we need to be challenging, but our job as teachers is to have all of our students learn excellently the things that we set out to teach. I make the point in many presentations that when you enter education you have one basic decision that you have to make. And how you decide this decision will determine your entire career and that basic decision, that question you must address is, is my purpose to select talent or is it to develop talent? It is one of the two and you can't say both, because they apply very different things. If your purpose is to select talent, then what you have to do is maximize the differences among students. You need to spread them out because if students are all clustered together very closely on any measure of their learning it's very hard to distinguish between them.

Now, unfortunately, from a student's perspective, the very best device we know to accentuate the differences between students is poor teaching. I mean nothing does it better than that. If you want to maximize the differences between students you teach as poorly as you know how. Because some students will learn regardless of what we as teachers do. The vast majority of students who need our help won't get it and we will accentuate those differences. On the other hand, if your purpose is to develop talent then the first thing you have to do is to find very clearly what it is you want them to learn to be able to do.

Learning in any subject area is actually infinite. There's no limit to what you can learn in any subject area. But a curriculum is finite. When we define a curriculum, we say within this entire domain of learning here are the things we believe are most important for students to learn to be able to do. And as soon as you define that curriculum, that finite curriculum, then our job becomes helping all students to learn that excellently. And we want to actually diminish that variation among students we want all to learn well. So to move to that orientation—that if all my students learn excellently maybe that's a better indication of the quality of my teaching than it is the rigor of the expectations of separate students. Now when you make those expectations clear, the other thing that it does it allows those discussions to take place. So when I get accused of grade inflation, what I say is, "look, these are the criteria that I'm using to assign those grades." So we can discuss and we should discuss if those are sufficiently rigorous criteria or not, but as soon as you agree with me if they are, I've won. I mean I can't help it I'm such a great teacher that all my students can meet those criteria. That's my job! That's what I'm setting out to do. I challenge anybody to set the same high standards for their students that I set for mine. I mean, I'm as tough as they come. So it's not that the standards or the rigor of the standard. It's the question. We need to make sure those are clearly articulated, but once we set them our job as educators to have all of our students, every one of them, learn those things excellently. And we should take pride when that occurs.

JB: Man, yeah I'm gonna need a minute to process all of that because I think that that philosophy is so powerful. The idea that the bell curve—the normal distribution— constitutes a failure of teaching—like that's what happens before intervention. And if we are going to see the impact of our teaching the impact should be a squishing up of that distribution toward mastery—toward the top of the curve.

If I think back to my most impactful experience as a learner—the course that changed me the most—it was a college writing class called advanced composition. And I would say there was not grade inflation in that course, but what I did see was on every single assignment I would get a terrible grade on my first draft and I would get an excellent grade on my final draft. And I knew if I didn't improve from my first draft to my final draft—I think we wrote ten papers over

the course of the semester—if I didn't improve I was going to fail. My grade was going to reflect the quality of my writing, which in my first draft was not good. And that A that I got in that class was the hardest A that I ever got. I felt like I deserved it in the end because it constituted real learning. So help us understand when it comes to shifting our philosophy, shifting our goal to wanting all students to attain mastery. You know we've been saying that since the 80s, we've been saying that since Madeline Hunter and mastery learning. How do we make that real in a way that makes sense to all of our stakeholders, that make sense to parents, to colleges that doesn't look like the bad kind of grade inflation? How do we distinguish between really teaching to a high level of mastery and simply being a low rigor school where we just give out As to everybody for the heck of it?

TG: Well I think that's one of the major advantages of our orientation toward being standards-based is that as we discussed earlier the first step in that process is to clearly articulate what it is you want students to learn to be able to do. That opens the door to really meaningful discussions about, are those things sufficiently rigorous? Are they challenging? Are they aligned with worldwide standards? I always when presenting to parents stress that they have to understand the real competition for their child in school today it's not the student that's sitting beside them in class today. It's the students as sitting today in a classroom in Beijing or Shanghai or Delhi or Mumbai. And to understand that our kids, because our society has become so globally-oriented have to be able to compete with those same students on that worldwide basis.

So we need to look at our curriculum, ensure that we are providing our students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in that world. And not only just an academic skill but also the sort of personal attributes the social-emotional attributes that will help them to succeed in that environment as well. But once we clarify that, then the challenge becomes how can we help students learn that really well? How can we get accurate information to reflect their learning? And then how do we really accurately communicate that to parents and the families so that they know what we're striving to attain and they can help their students in the process.

JB: Tom, early on in the book you talked about the importance of forming a coalition for change. Why is it so important to build that coalition.

TG: In preparing the book, one of the things that I did was to analyze school districts throughout the country and in some cases throughout the world international schools that had attempted grading reform and failed miserably in their efforts. From that analysis trying to understand what it is that contributed to their failure and why they did not succeed. And we found that in that analysis, one of the major contributing factors was the lack of communication with primary stakeholders in this process. So the book stresses not only the nature of those stakeholders but also what they understanding their desires, understanding the perspectives and orientations they bring to this change process, and how to purposely engage them in the sort of planning and an implementation of these grading reforms.

One of the chapters that are also included in the book with the coalition of change is a chapter on the change process. And I think it's really important for stakeholders to understand what prompts people to change and what inhibits that change? What are the barriers that you have to overcome? So I think if you bring together these very diverse stakeholders that in many ways share common interests, they want students to do well in school, they want them to be prepared for the challenges they're going to face in their life. They want them to feel confident as learners and they want them to be successful in learning experiences. So you unite them with those commonly shared goals and then understand the perspectives they bring to that but then have a focus and understanding a change process that can help them move in a positive direction to bring about more purposeful changes that could then be supported and sustained.

JB: Well Tom, I know in the book you distinguish between and emphasize the importance of both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. What do we need to be thinking about in terms of reporting on those?

TG: When we have done reporting well we primarily focused on reporting academic knowledge and skills, how well students have learned, or established

curriculum and how will they require the skills we hope they would develop in relation to their knowledge base. And our reporting systems that have succeeded have done that pretty well, but what we've lacked are all these other things that contribute to student success in school and in life beyond. So the focus on reporting that non-cognitive outcomes really takes us in that direction. We find for example, that oftentimes when teachers determine students' grades they consider these non-cognitive factors, but then they lump it into one single grade. So that if a student doesn't do homework, that's really not an indication of how well they've learned—it's have you followed my rules? Have you done the things that I asked you to do? And when we combine that into a single grade it miscommunicates both the highly responsible low achiever gets the same grade as the irresponsible high achiever. And so the premise of that work is to say we need to begin all the reform efforts by moving away from a single grade and giving multiple grades for these different factors to pull non-achievement factors out.

Now when we looked at those non-achievement factors we find that there were three different major types that teachers consider when they determine students' grades. The first was a category that we call learning enablers. And learning enablers don't reflect learning per se, but they certainly contribute to the learning process homework, for example, is a learning enabler. Class participation is a learning enabler. Formative assessments are learning enablers. And many times teachers include those as a part of a grade but they're really not an indication of achievement in that way. So we may want to pull those out and report those separately.

A second category is a huge group of social-emotional learning skills. So here's where characteristics like resilience and perseverance, being able to work collaboratively with classmates, empathy, grit—all those kinds of responsibility aspects would come in. And a third category that we find many teachers use is just labeled compliance. And compliance is, did you do what I told you to had to do? Did you behave in class? Did you turn in your papers on time? But don't reflect learning but they just reflect going along with the established rules.

Now we're not in a position yet today to indicate among those which is the ab-

solute the most important. What we do know is that a different from achievement. And so the book tries to describe to educators how we can identify those and then puts the tasks to them of picking out what they think is most important so they can report those separately and actually pull those out of an achievement grade. So an achievement is more directly aligned with what the students have learned they're able to do. That means that grades would be more closely aligned with other measures of achievement—state assessment results, IB exams or advanced placement exams, SAT scores, ACT scores—because we pulled those non-achievement factors out of it. But we need to communicate to students that these are still important and so we need to include them as a part of reporting practice, include them on the transcript include them on the report card, as well. And we're finding increased evidence of how important they truly are.

One of the studies I described in the book was a very large study completed in the United States where they identified these highly successful people in business, these CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and the like, and ask them what their college GPA was.

Now, these are all really successful men and women, they're extremely successful in their career, they are multimillionaires. What would you guess to be the average college GPA of a Fortune 500 CEO? JB: Yeah, probably not super high, right? A 2.9, a 3.2? TG: Well that's good. 2.9, not even a B average which says there's something other than their academic prowess that contributed to their success. So recognizing that what can we do to help students develop those skills? How can we build that into academic programs and then report students' progress in the development of the skills on the report card and on the transcript?

JB: Well Tom, I know your previous book, Get Ready, queues up one part of this approach for people. I wonder if we could talk about the relationship between Get Ready and Get Set, Go, your newest book? Help us understand that.

TG: In both high school and college I was a sprinter and competed at a very high level there. And the commands you get for sprinters are always on your

mark, get set, go. So the first book, On Your Mark, is a description of the major issues in grading that are challenging to us. The things we need to take on. It dealt with issues that our research of it indicates aren't working very well and said here are some things we really need to look at to seriously change.

The follow-up—the sequel to that— the Get Set, Go book it actually goes into the strategies of how you can accomplish that. What it is that you need to do to really bring about changes that will be successful in their initial implementation and can be sustained over time. So the initial effort in developing the book where we looked at programs that failed, there's a whole section in the book of what programs failed and why they failed was to indicate that they had started with good ideas but they were not thoughtful about the implementation process. So this book is specifically designed to help school leaders understand the change process and understand what needs to be done to bring about successful reforms that can be supported, will be supported by a broad range of constituents and stakeholders, and it can be sustained over time. So if On Your Mark is what to change, then Get Set, Go is how to do it.

JB: I think that's such a powerful combination because, as any experienced leader will tell you, knowing the correct thing to do is a very different order from actually getting everybody on board to do it. So I'm grateful that you've written the follow-up to help people actually make that transition in it. And if people do want to reach out to you, maybe engage you for some assistance with this, Tom, where's the best place for people to go online to get in touch with you?

TG: Well there's several places. I do have a website. It's just TGuskey.com is the website. And there they can find copies, presentations, blogs that I've written for education week for Solution Tree, Corwin Press, ASCD and like. They can download articles on assessment, grading, professional development, mastery learning there as well. They can contact me through email and my email address is guskey@uky.edu, its University of Kentucky. or they can contact me through Twitter. My Twitter address just @TGuskey so any one of those three would be fine as a means to get in touch with me and I really welcome that opportunity.

JB: Wonderful, yeah. It's great to see you engaging with educators you know not only being a distinguished researcher and author but engaging people directly. I love to see that. So Tom Guskey, thank you so much for joining me on Principal Center Radio. It's been a pleasure.

TG: Justin, it has been my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Announcer: Thanks for listening to Principal Center Radio!

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BUILDING CAPACITY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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