CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE
on District Reform

Meeting 53 Summary
Grading for Equity: Shifting Policies, Practices, and Mindsets in Sanger

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> *Note: This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly and to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In May 2024, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in Sanger, California for their final meeting of the 2023–24 academic year. The Collaborative's year-long focus on teaching and learning continued with the unpacking of a key aspect of the learning environment at the secondary level: the grading practices through which teachers document student progress and the implications of these for student engagement, content mastery, and academic progress.

The rapid transition to distance learning in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic forced districts to address the immediate implications of traditional grading practices that could have resulted in high failure rates and closed postsecondary pathways for many students. Well into pandemic recovery, many districts have confronted the reality that grades present barriers to opportunity even in normal times. Too often, grades prioritize point accumulation over learning and reflect biases that create a steeper road to success for historically underserved students. Sanger Unified School District (USD) has been digging into the work of grading for equity and shifting practices and mindsets for several years and hosted the 53rd meeting of the Collaborative to generate discussion about their approach and similar efforts in districts across the state.

Understanding the Sanger Context

Sanger USD, located in California's Central Valley, is a district experiencing growing enrollment that currently serves more than 13,000 students in 21 schools spanning grades TK-12. The district's vision is that they "believe all students will have equitable access to learning with options and opportunities to be successful and achieve their dreams." To accomplish this, the district has built a strong collaborative learning culture to support

continuous improvement through professional learning teams (PLTs) for their educators. This is made possible by the district's leadership style of attending to the relationships and connections "below the green line," which has helped forge a climate of trust and shared accountability for student success.[2] One way the district does this is by carefully navigating a balance between what is tight (the non-negotiables around what needs to happen consistently across the district), and what is loose (the elements around which educators can follow their preferences and professional judgment to respond to the individual needs of their students and school sites).

Problems With Traditional Grading Practice

A growing body of literature argues that traditional grading is inequitable for several reasons. First, grades often reflect students' access to resources or other external factors beyond their actual learning. For example, students with greater access to tutoring, stable home environments, or additional academic support that enable the accumulation of points for activities like homework completion may receive higher grades, regardless of their true mastery of the subject matter. Additionally, decades of research highlight the subjective nature of grading approaches and decisions, which opens those decisions to both conscious and unconscious biases that can unfairly disadvantage certain student groups.[3] Moreover, the calculation of average grades in classes where students receive a score of zero for missing or unfinished work can penalize students disproportionately relative to the knowledge and skills they demonstrate in their classes. This practice often results in students failing classes in which they could be successful, and results in grading decisions that close options for postsecondary education. Consequently, traditional grading systems can perpetuate inequities and limit growth opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds.

Advocates for standards-based grading, which focuses on assessing students' mastery of specific learning objectives, believe that this approach provides more accurate and meaningful feedback on student progress by emphasizing learning over performance. Alternative classroom and grading practices that align with this approach include providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery, using formative assessments to guide instruction, separating academic achievement from behaviors such as attendance and participation, implementing a no-zeroes policy, and supplying students with detailed grading rubrics. These practices aim to create a more equitable and supportive learning environment that prioritizes student learning.

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[2] The concept of "above and below the green line" is derived from Margaret Wheatley's Six Circle Model. The model outlines six interacting but distinct areas of focus in leading successful and sustainable organizational change. Structure, operations, and strategies relate to the technical infrastructure of an organization above an imaginary green line. Organizational identity, relationships, and information flow pertain to the underlying culture of an organization and are depicted below the green line.

[3] Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., Stevens, M. T., & Welsh, M. E. (2016). A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure. *Review of Educational Research*, *86*(4), 803–848. https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8NV9JQ0.

Sanger Unified School District's Grading Journey

Sanger USD began the journey to examine and reform their grading practices and employed the tight/loose change management strategy in their efforts to rethink grading. The district is in the second year of a targeted focus with volunteer PLTs to advance student learning and prioritize equity through attention to grading practices at the secondary level. Aspects of Sanger's approach have included a book study among district administrators, partnership with California Education Partners and other districts around grading, and targeted support from Doug Reeves and his team to further the work with teachers across the district.

The district began by establishing a *tight* expectation, asking teachers to pick a grading practice within their professional learning teams to better understand the shortcomings of traditional practice and to pilot one new approach during the school year. The *loose* aspect of this requirement was that teachers had the option to choose the grading practice they wanted to implement in their classrooms. Some of the approaches implemented included the following:

- *No zeroes:* This approach ensures that students do not receive a zero for incomplete or missing assignments. Instead, a minimum score of 50 is assigned, which helps maintain their overall grade and makes students feel less like they are trying to climb an insurmountable mountain to catch up.
- *Grading rubrics:* Teachers provided detailed grading rubrics to offer clear expectations and criteria for each assignment, allowing students to understand how they will be evaluated and how to meet or exceed standards.
- *No homework/only classwork:* Emphasizing in-class work over homework, this method aims to reduce the stress caused by differing home environments and to deter cheating and copying, ensuring all students have access to support and resources.
- *Test retakes:* Allowing students to retake tests helps reinforce learning by giving them an opportunity to improve on unfinished knowledge acquisition and improve their grades.

After implementing the grading practice in their classrooms, high school and middle school, teachers across the district gathered for a Grading Exhibition to showcase their work with other middle and high school teachers in the district and to share their successes, challenges, and thoughts on next steps. Similar to the set-up of a school science fair, each PLT created a visual display that described the approach that they took and engaged in discussion with visitors to their tables. Figure 1 provides a list of the tables on display at the event, including the general category within which each strategy fell.

Collaborative members attended the Grading Exhibition on the first day of the meeting to dialogue with the teachers and get a better understanding of the work teachers have done in the area of grading for equity. Members expressed amazement at the high level of trust across the district that allowed teachers to be vulnerable in sharing their work with one another and their deep commitment to their profession and students to invest the time in this work.

One meeting participant stated, "This was a safe environment to share not only wins, but also things that didn't work. That's really valuable." Others expressed a keen interest and curiosity about what the data say about the impact on implementing these policies on

A–G rates and high school graduation rates. District leaders shared that the variation in grading practices and the fidelity with which teachers are employing new approaches make it difficult to draw any conclusions about the viability of specific grading practices; however, they are seeing fewer failing grades across all groups, including those that have been historically marginalized.

Figure 1. Sanger USD Grading Exhibition Chart

Examining Data to Illuminate Challenges in Traditional Grading Practices

To develop a shared understanding of why grading practices can be ineffective, inaccurate, and inequitable, meeting participants broke into small groups to examine data from three separate district contexts—Napa Valley Unified, Sanger Unified, and data from the CORE Districts.

Evidence of Disparities in Grades and Graduation Rates for Multilingual Learners

One of the central problems with traditional grading practices is their impact on students' academic success while in high school and the ways in which grade point average and graduation requirements can close doors for future academic progress. Examining disparities in grades and graduation rates among student subgroups can reveal gaps in opportunities and outcomes that require attention from system leaders.

Napa Valley Unified School District (NVUSD) has seen a steady increase in its newcomer and multilingual learners (MLL) population, who now make up 24.6% of the district's student population, and demographic studies predict this number will continue to increase. Gaps in academic performance between MLLs and the overall population of students suggest that these students do not yet have the supports they need to thrive.]Many of these gaps tie directly to student grades. For example, the graduation rate for all students is 92%, compared with 82% for MLLs, and 45% of all students complete their A–G requirements, compared with 8% of MLLs. Additionally, the D and F rates of MLLs are double those of the overall student population. Superintendent Rosanna Mucetti stated, "No matter how you look at it, you can see that there are these huge gaps." One source of frustration for the district is that these gaps persist despite strong instructional teams and principal leaders, as well as great labor relations.

To try and address these inequitable outcomes, the district has been exploring programmatic and systemic changes they could make to address these differences, including exploring standards-based learning and grading with a small subset of teachers. They also started examining student transcripts and master schedules to make some data-informed decisions to optimize student success and grading outcomes.

Superintendent Mucetti also shared that the district is considering a newcomer-only center or program strand at a targeted school that could address the intense language needs for its newcomer and multilingual students. This would enable them to target professional development to build capacity of their educators. One meeting participant shared that her district has both newcomer-only schools as well as newcomers embedded in traditional schools, and that the district has seen mixed results with both approaches.

To better understand the disparities in outcomes for multilingual learners, meeting participants also suggested closely examining disaggregated data to get a sense of whether the students are newcomers, have interrupted learning in their history, are clustered in certain parts of the districts, and are Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEPs) or long-term ELs. Such analyses could enable district leaders to better pinpoint the root causes for gaps in student outcomes and appropriately design and target interventions and supports.

Evidence of Disparities in Grading Practices as Evidenced in Course Syllabi

Research on grading practices highlights both the wide variation among teachers and the ways in which grading practices reward behaviors that are loosely related to content mastery. A systematic review of course syllabi can help to crystallize these issues and

identify areas for attention in a district's work with its teaching staff. As part of its grading journey, Sanger USD leaders have examined course syllabi to better understand current grading practices. That process revealed both the widespread use of misguided practices and substantial variability in grading practices across schools, among teachers in the same school, and often in the same department.

To replicate the experience of a course syllabus audit, Sanger USD representatives provided a sample of syllabi from the district's two high schools and one middle school. Due to time constraints, meeting participants were only able to examine and discuss the syllabi from one of the high schools.

Meeting participants noted that despite the work teachers have engaged in over the past two years around grading for equity, syllabi showed evidence of a heavy reliance on homework, narrowly defined opportunities to redo work, and in one case, the use of arbitrary factors such as a student's reputation in class as an influence on a grade. Substantial variation was evident even within the same departments. The most consistent observation that emerged from discussion among participants was that, in the words of one small group member, "they're all over the place." Another participant stated, "What we're seeing here is what happens in most of our systems. We train and we think that what we trained on is happening."

Evidence of Disparities in Course Failures Across Classes and Teachers

Because grading practices often vary widely across classrooms and schools, a deeper understanding of this variation can help system leaders better understand the challenges that require attention and appropriately targeted interventions to address them. By unpacking the degree to which grading disparities exist across teachers within the same department, across courses within a school, or across schools within a district, district leaders can better tailor their supports.

CORE Districts is an organization formed by several large California school districts collaborating to solve inequities in the education system to ensure that students thrive. They use improvement science to help students progress by creating reliable processes and systems. Representatives from the organization presented data on ninth-grade D and F data in six schools within one of their participating districts. By focusing on variation (1) at the district level, (2) at the school level, and (3) within individual courses, educators seek to pinpoint the root causes of variation in order to design interventions that are targeted and effective. For example, although researchers and practitioners alike appropriately identify Algebra 1 as a common course with high failure rates that tends to disrupt students' academic progress, CORE Districts analysts found that rates of Ds and Fs are actually higher in elective courses. This evidence suggests that some combination of teacher and student approaches to these classes merits attention. As another example, unusually high failure rates for a single member of a grade level team might call for individual capacity-building efforts, whereas consistently high levels of Ds and Fs across a

team might mean that a group approach to reflection, collective learning, and change in practice is more appropriate.

Meeting participants noted the variability across the district, and within a given school, but had questions about the student populations at each of the school sites as well as about the qualifications of the teachers at different schools. Without more context, they felt it was difficult to really know the story behind the data. The key takeaway is that within one grade level, in one school, in one large system, the variability in the data reflects nuance and complexity that requires deep analysis.

Addressing these variations in grading practices is especially challenging because, in the words of one participant, the root cause is rarely "a teacher problem." Meeting participants noted that disparities in outcomes due to inequitable grading practices are a shared responsibility. Any system attempting to address grading practices must take a holistic, systems-level approach to the issue. Framing the issue as a collective problem involving scheduling, curriculum, and professional development fosters a sense of shared responsibility within the system that also creates the trust necessary to move the work forward. Meeting participants also suggested including student voice to understand the tasks students are engaged in and how they align with the system's expectations.

Supporting Educators to Shift Mindsets and Practices

In Sanger's pursuit of rethinking grading practices, district administrators understand that true transformation will require efforts beyond mere policy change at the district level. Progress demands a fundamental shift in the mindsets and practices of educators. Supporting teachers through this transition is critical as they are the ones implementing these changes in their classrooms.

A panel of middle and high school educators from across Sanger USD shared their experiences with the strategies and supports they have received from the district, as well as additional supports needed to empower educators to embrace and sustain new grading practices aimed at more accurately and equitably reflecting student learning and achievement.

Providing Professional Development Opportunities

The district provided opportunities for teachers to learn more about equitable grading practices through professional development (PD). One educator shared, "We were provided a lot of PD days where they asked us about the changes we wanted to make. I learned that I don't need to make my tests 20 questions. Five questions can show whether or not a student knows a standard." Some of the teachers also had the opportunity to learn at conferences, but the panelists shared that opportunities to apply lessons learned in daily practice were the most important aspect of their experience. One panelist emphasized that doing so would help teachers "identify the belief systems that prevent them from embracing this." Another agreed that providing PD opportunities for the staff to understand "the why" and spaces to have difficult conversations and learn from one another allows educators to grow and develop.

Fostering a Culture of Collaboration and Innovation

Leaders and teachers on the panel both agreed about the importance of creating a culture of collaboration and innovation. Leaders must create the space and conditions for teachers to work together and learn from one another, and teachers need to embrace the discomfort and vulnerability of shifting directions. One panelist's statement illustrated the strength of Sanger USD's culture within its PLTs: "Collaboration is key, because all of these kids are ours. This is a shared responsibility. Different teachers might have different teaching styles and methods, but our grading should be the same. That's what standards-based grading should be, and we should be willing to give it a try."

Allowing Flexibility for Educators

The panelists also appreciated the flexibility from district and site leadership in trying out the grading changes: "We were given the trust and flexibility to try what we wanted to try. Flexibility is important, because different sites and different departments have different needs."

Communicating a Clear Message

Although the teachers appreciated the flexibility needed to implement grading changes in their classrooms, they emphasized the importance of a clear message. Internal messaging that clarifies timelines and the aspects of the district's expectations that are tight and some loose is critical to ensure initial investment in change and sustainability of new approaches. Additionally, messaging that includes clear data communicating the evidence and pointing to the "why" will help the educators and community buy into the effort as well. Many teachers and parents grew up in a system where grades reflected the accumulation of points. That language of schooling is familiar and comfortable for many adults. Panelists stated that the path to shifting everyone's mindset begins with clear communication about the reasons for change and details about what change entails.

Challenges in Implementation

Although the district has established multiple aspects of its approach to shifting grading practice, many implementation challenges remain. Meeting participants broke into small groups to discuss the complexity of implementing system-wide grading reforms across districts.

Overcoming Resistance

District leaders shared that many teachers and school leaders have been using the same grading practices for years, so changing them can feel like abandoning long-held methods they see as personal and effective. Shifting away from these practices can also create a sense of anxiety in educators, who may fear making mistakes or doing something that may be harmful to their students. The high levels of trust and collaboration that already exist in Sanger provide a strong foundation for facilitating this kind of change. One participant shared, "There are themes of trust, the ability to be vulnerable, feedback circles from the boots on the ground to the school and district leadership, and there is leading from the middle. It's really rare to see people within a school and district that are so secure." To help

mitigate resistance, any district wishing to support the mental and cultural shifts required to revisit traditional grading practice should consciously seek to build trust among educators and demonstrate the benefits of standards-based grading for students.

Educators must also take into consideration the resistance from the parent population to pivoting grading practices. Parents may fear, for example, that changes will negatively affect their children's academic futures, particularly if the change is not something they are familiar with. Clear communication and explanations about standards-based grading can help overcome any resistance and help parents feel more invested in any changes.

Using Data to Drive Decision-Making

Data provide concrete evidence that can help educators make informed decisions, both to illuminate challenges with an existing system and to monitor progress toward more effective behaviors. Strategic data collection and use is especially important given the complex nature and high variability in district-wide student performance data. Many of these data will reflect student grades themselves. However, meeting participants also raised questions about the most effective approaches to gauge student learning and performance. New sources of evidence such as student portfolios could provide valuable insights about student learning that can both inform and complement data provided through grades. One meeting participant promoted reflection and adaptation in measuring student learning by asserting, "This is the time to examine the competencies we want students to acquire. That requires some innovation and creativity and engagement with students and their families in the types of data we are willing to consider."

Finding the Right Balance Between Tight and Loose

Panelists expressed their appreciation of the tight and loose elements that set clear expectations while granting them flexibility to apply craft to meet the needs of their classroom. However, meeting participants emphasized that striking the right balance is critical for districts pursuing changes in grading practice. While autonomy is necessary, some standardization and consistency across departments and schools, as well as alignment on standards and rubrics, is critical to ensure fairness and equity in grading. This can also take the form of official guidance and board policy. In Sanger, district leaders have made progress in establishing "pillars" that should guide grading practices.
The grading pillars in Sanger USD emphasize the need to:
- Continuously explore fair and accurate grading practices;
- Ensure all grades reflect student mastery of grade-level standards;
- Advocate for grade-level standards-based instruction, tasks, and assessments with appropriate scaffolding;
- Communicate grades consistently and in a timely manner, and make them actionable to promote student growth;
- Align the grading system with defined success criteria; and
- Provide multiple means for students to demonstrate mastery.

Implementing these pillars requires navigating tensions between providing teachers with the flexibility to meet their students' needs and maintaining enough standardization to ensure consistency and equity. District leaders are also trying to balance autonomy with the need for clear, consistent standards and rubrics across all schools and departments. This careful balance, supported by official guidance and board policies, is crucial for fostering an equitable grading system.

Leveraging Student Voice to Monitor Progress and Navigate the Consequences of Change

Initial evidence in Sanger USD indicates that early efforts to rethink grading are successfully removing barriers to A–G completion by decreasing the number of D's and F's that students receive. Even as new practices open doors for historically underserved students, they also reshape the pathway to success for students who have been successful at accumulating points in their classes—even if those points are not aligned with content mastery. District leaders are grappling with the full range of consequences for moving in a more equitable direction. Student voice becomes critical in understanding the student learning experience and ways in which changing approaches to instruction and grading shape that experience.

Meeting participants had the opportunity to break into small groups and engage with middle school and high school students through empathy interviews to examine implications of district practice on student experiences in school.

Students Articulated Mixed Feelings About Including Homework and Classwork in a Final Grade

Student reflections revealed mixed feelings about the transitioning grading practices within the district. For example, some teachers are moving to reduce the emphasis on homework and increase the weight of assessments in a student's final grade, with the belief that such an approach better reflects student learning. One student shared, "I like assessments being the full grade because it measures what you know. A lot of homework is busy work or can be Googled or a friend can help with it. There's no accountability with homework." Others added that with the rise of AI, it can be difficult for teachers to know if a student completed an assignment on their own. Still others stated that extracurricular activities, afterschool jobs, and other responsibilities present obstacles for students to complete their homework. These students appreciated that they did not get penalized in their final grade for not completing homework when most of their learning takes place in class.

On the other hand, another student provided a different point of view, stating, "I would change the way we are graded. I want assignments and homework to count for grades. In one of my classes, assignments count towards the grade, and I feel more prepared for tests. In math, our assignments don't count." Other students said that in addition to reflecting student knowledge, they should also reflect some level of effort made by students. Furthermore, some students added that assessments can induce anxiety in students, which can affect performance and might not be the best indicator of what students know and can

do. The differences of opinion underscore the importance of articulating the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that students should demonstrate in school, the purpose of grades in the learning process, and the practices that can best support these goals.

Students Expressed a Desire for Consistent Policies

Students also emphasized the importance of consistent expectations across their classes. As part of Sanger USD's approach to piloting new practices, the district asked teachers to pick a grading change and implement it in their classrooms. Some implemented a no-zero policy. Others chose a no-homework policy. Because teachers had the autonomy to select their areas of focus, and as evidenced in the grading exhibition (see Figure 1), teacher teams featured substantial variability in what teachers chose to "try on." Although teachers noted their appreciation for this flexibility, the students expressed confusion with the variability and inconsistency. One stated, "It's a little confusing when they change it up." Students explained that grading policies might be completely different as they move from Spanish to math to English class.

Beyond the confusion created by the variation in practices, students also raised concerns about the fairness of these approaches. For example, some math teachers might offer test retakes while others do not. Thus, two students with the same level of content mastery at the end of the class might receive very different grades depending on how each teacher captures and rewards evidence of student knowledge and skills.

Students Most Value the Support and Resources They Receive From Their Teachers

Regardless of variable grading practices, students overwhelmingly expressed that the most important factor in their learning experience is the support and resources they get from their teachers. This perspective reinforces the essential point that grading practice must fundamentally serve high quality teaching and learning. According to one Sanger USD student, "We have amazing teachers here who will talk to you and help you through the hard points. It's in communicating with the teacher or asking for resources that we learn best. If you're not doing that, you won't improve." Therefore, it is imperative that districts provide the supports and resources teachers need to introduce material to students, monitor students' understanding of the material, and provide support as appropriate so that students can thrive.

Preparing for District-Wide Change by Widening and Deepening Implementation

Changes in grading policies at the secondary level have helped teachers to cultivate a deeper understanding of challenges associated with traditional grading practice and to embrace needed shifts. One key lesson from the work so far is that approaches to grading are fundamentally tied to instructional quality; a shift toward capturing mastery in course grades also requires a shift toward prioritizing mastery in the instructional environment. To help align expectations for teachers and students and promote consistency across students' K–12 educational experience, Sanger USD is beginning to expand its efforts to

include Grades K–8 and asked meeting participants to help identify considerations for expanding a focus on grading practices to include all grade levels.

Identify the Goal and Clearly Articulate It

Discussions throughout the meeting acknowledged potential confusion and misalignment about what the end goal of a district grading policy change should be. Should grading practices prioritize content mastery? If so, what sources of evidence best provide evidence of mastery? To what extent should grading practices reward effort and productive behaviors? Whatever the district decides, in partnership with its stakeholders, the goal must be clearly articulated. Doing so will help build shared understanding and align efforts towards a common and coherent vision among district staff, students, and community members.

Keep Equity at the Center

Traditional grading systems often fail to account for the diverse needs and circumstances of students, which leads to disparities in academic outcomes that disproportionately affect those with special learning needs, English learners, and other historically marginalized groups. By prioritizing equitable grading practices, the district can ensure that grades more accurately reflect student learning rather than factors like language proficiency or the home environment in which students must complete homework. This approach includes implementing alternative assessments tailored to individual needs, offering language assistance, and providing additional targeted supports. By aligning grading practices with these supports, the district can create a fairer and more inclusive educational environment that truly measures and supports student learning.

Support Teachers

Extending the implementation of grading reform throughout the district can help students form the foundational attitudes towards learning and mastery rather than point accumulation at an early stage in their educational journey. Doing so will require time and investment of resources, as well as additional supports for teachers because as one meeting participant stated, "If we are going to grade differently, then we also have to teach differently." Reforming grading practices will require teachers to adopt new methodologies, tools, and strategies, so providing professional development opportunities to equip the teachers to implement these changes effectively for the long term is crucial.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet next in fall 2024. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to share key lessons and takeaways from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators, as we did in 2023, through briefs, commentaries, webinars, and legislative briefings. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.