

“Stop the Madness”

First, thank you all for your service. I am sure most Vermonters have no idea how much precious time you have given for us. Thank you, Dylan, for the invitation. When Dylan knocked on my door and told us his story, he won our vote. Plus, he likes cats, so we're good.

We each have a story...and that story is what I want for every student. Standards can be a part of a student's story, but because I believe Standards-Based Grading is the worst thing I've seen in my 30 years of teaching, I do not want SBG in its present form as part of *any* student's story.

My story begins when my father, a depression-era kid born very near the Passumpsic River in St. Johnsbury, learned to run his father's heating and plumbing business as an 11-year-old while also helping out at the store his mother's family ran: Landry's Drugstore. I believe Rep. Beck knows the area. My dad worked hard and valued every single penny. I hear Rep. Mattos values every penny. Everything was reused, sometimes in creative ways. Dad married Mom, Thérèse Cote of Derby Line, after they were classmates in Sacred Heart School in Newport. He was not prepared for the content UVM required, so he had to drop out...but some caring priests and a certain scientist at St. Michael's College showed interest in his potential. To afford school— since he was the first to attend in his family—he enrolled in the the Air Force ROTC program at St. Michael's.

Because he had people who took a personal interest in him as a learner, he did well enough to enroll in a Ph.D. program in Canada. After earning his Ph.D., he was assigned to Wright Paterson Air Force Base as a scientist in the Aerospace Medical Research Lab. I believe Rep. Cupoli is also an Air Force veteran. Among many jobs, he worked on the tube feeding for the U-2 (spy plane) pilots and began work on the Mercury project. Soon NASA called, and this poor kid from St. Johnsbury - a UVM dropout - became the lead scientist in Houston, developing the nutrition program for our Gemini and then Apollo astronauts. His standards were so high that he rejected every food item that had been proposed for space. Never in human history had there been food created with zero pathogens. He had very high standards. He became the father of the HACCP (“Hassip” - Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) system that is now used worldwide by the entire food industry. His high standards have saved millions from becoming ill due to poor or even average food preparation. <http://www.foodqualityandsafety.com/article/former-nasa-food-coordinator-pioneered-the-haccp-system/>

Throughout his life, my dad argued for common sense and for every penny to count. He argued for people to be knowledgeable, and he was known as a tough grader at Rutgers University (I believe Rep. Joseph knows about Rutgers) where Dad retired after 40 years. I learned two other lessons from the Rev. Dr. Paul Lachance that I've transferred to my own story: use common sense and *time is precious*. He died last year: http://ucmweb.rutgers.edu/inmemoriam/?q=inmemoriam_record&id=645

I have adopted part of my story from my mom, too. As a nurse, she would punch out after her shift - too often, the graveyard shift - and then go back to each one of her patients to triplecheck her work and to show her patients compassion. I'm told it was not unusual for my mom to be seen holding hands with her patients and listening to their story when she could have come home. My mom's stroke has taken her voice from us. *Time is precious*.

We all learn from people we spend a great deal of time with, and I learned from my parents to invest precious time into what shows results because “time” is the most valuable commodity we have in

“Stop the Madness”

life; and to constantly self-assess; to not be blind followers of any organization or system or political party; to improve our country, our state, our world; to fight and fight hard, when need be, like I am doing today; to be grateful; to be compassionate; to work extremely hard and to do the research; to be honest and fair. To know what you're talking about.

Like my mom loved her patients and my dad loved his astronauts and many college and Ph.D students, I love my students. The time I spend with them is incredibly short, and we have so much to learn. They have very complex lives. My evenings and weekends are often spent responding to emails and developing high quality learning experiences that are personalized and differentiated. I've always given narrative feedback instead of just posting a few numbers on student work, and both students and parents are grateful for my written feedback.

Then came Standards-Based Grading. I don't have time to share all the parts of SBG that I support, and my general message to you today is that if we could just all get together and leave biases at the door and actually look at evidence, we could keep what works and throw away what doesn't. We need evidence, and evidence is what is lacking.

One problem I want to acknowledge today is that teachers are being forced to accept everything - the entire philosophy - about the program, and if we question anything, the question is seen as a personal attack against a coach, administrator, or fellow teacher. Teachers are afraid to challenge the avalanche called SBG.

Let's look at a student because too many proponents of SBG live in theories and websites. I live with students and teachers. AND, I try to make things work with a full class load and three preps. I'm tired of hearing someone advocate for SBG who doesn't live in the world of a full-time teacher.

We use a software system that tracks all the targets that teachers enter. We align our targets to the school's locally chosen Graduation Standards. During his sophomore year, my advisee had 419 scores...419. 419 data points. If that happened over four years, he would have over 1600 scores.

He doesn't understand what it all means - he can't figure out how those scores translate into an overall number in a specific standard ...and this teacher can't explain how it works either. For the first time in my teaching career, I can't explain the numbers or grade equivalent. The program is in control rather than the teacher. That's unethical. It's also unethical that at least some parents can't understand the reports.

I wonder if the House Education Committee realizes that there is an equity issue with SBG because while some parents can figure out reports accessed through technology, many others cannot. That's unethical and it's not common sense.

Let's return to the 419 scores for one student for one year. There's an old saying written many ways: "weighing a pig don't make it fatter." I'm not calling my student a pig, of course, but throwing data all over him doesn't make him a more skillful or knowledgeable student.

And every penny counts. My local taxpayers spend \$44,000 over four years to follow a class of students through our high school. Wow. Did you know that Vermont high schools, if you put them together, are

“Stop the Madness”

sending hundreds of thousands of dollars or more to out-of-state companies so that we can use their convoluted programs?

Here’s the thing: if the state is requiring all this data, then what we have here is an unfunded mandate. But I’ve talked to a good person at the AOE, and she told me that the State certainly doesn’t want all that data. What *does* the state want?

So, there must be evidence that it’s worth it, right? All the time? All the money? I teach juniors and seniors, and my school has been using SBG for quite a few years. I don’t see better writers coming to me. I don’t see better thinkers. I don’t hear better speakers. They seem about the same to me. In fact, I see students who are less knowledgeable, less able to meet deadlines, and are preferring to hand in low quality work because they know they are going to receive many chances to improve the work.

Please be careful with what some proponents of the SBG community may be sharing today. Look closely at their evidence. Example: you may hear that there is a document that lists colleges who have studied transcripts from “proficiency-based” systems and that students “will experience no disadvantage in the evaluation and admissions process.”

Wait - read that again: they will experience “no disadvantage”...is THAT an endorsement? No harm, no foul?

Please also look at the colleges and universities who signed the document. The number is in the low hundreds. I believe there are over 5000 colleges and universities in the U.S. Oh - and when I see on the list schools that accept almost every warm body that applies and I delete those schools, I’m left with a limited list. And look at a transcript: if there isn’t a separate grade for math, for example, how is one to know that the student is knowledgeable about math? Well, “the Problem-solving standard of course.” Wrong. Teachers may be inputting data into “problem-solving” from a number of different disciplines. We recently hosted a College Fair at my school. I asked an Admissions Counselor, and she shared that if she can’t tell what the student knows about math, for example, she’ll look at the SAT score. Wow. All of high school, and the SAT test, taken on one day, may count more than ever.

Did you know that the numbers being assigned as grades are as poorly calibrated as the old system? We haven’t agreed what a ‘one’ is or what a ‘four means’, so students are confused - like they have always been about grades. No better. As an aside: I don’t understand how a ‘1’ is allowed if we are supposed to be caring about “standards.”

Did our standardized test scores go up? No. About the same.

Wow. And it’s not just all the money being spent. Our most precious resource is time. We have coaches and administrators leading us through trainings. That’s time. We need them to be available for the system to work. That’s time. Then what about all the time that teachers use - on top of everything else - to punch in the numbers and wait for the system to save and then freeze...419 data points on one student for one year of high school.

If things aren’t improving, then *let’s use common sense.*

“Stop the Madness”

They may say that SBG “informs the teacher’s practice.” Wait. I was able to inform my practice before SBG entered my school, and I can certainly do it without spending evening and weekends inputting and looking at uncalibrated data.

Every *penny* counts. If SBG was helping my students, I would do everything I could to make it work. But I’m here to tell you that I’m not seeing better writers, better thinkers, better speakers, better *anything* as a result of SBG being used. The evidence suggests that maybe the students are not doing much worse, but there is no evidence that they’re doing better. All this work and very little show for it.

Wait - did you realize how much help teachers need to learn and use the program? Will other schools have all those human resources? Probably not, so now we have yet *another* equity issue.

And when you’re told that “change is hard,” please hear *my* voice: I’ve adopted many changes and led many changes. I refuse to be dropped into that condescending phrase, suggesting that me and colleagues are resistant to change. Nope. SBG hasn’t produced what was promised. Time is too valuable to wallow in the present system.

I could go on, but I need to offer some solutions. Rev. Dr. Paul and Thérèse Lachance would be very disappointed if I didn’t offer help.

Here’s what I would do:

This state is not ready for a standards-based transcript. Not even close. We haven’t done our homework. You’ll be told that in an SBG system, “teachers report what students know and are able to do relative to the Standards.” I like that! -- but we haven’t agreed what it means to meet each standard. What does it look like? Sound like? We’re not ready to blast off. We’re not ready to end our shift. We’re not ready for the 2020 deadline. Example: I haven’t been shown a transcript that accurately reports where the student finished with each skill or content standard. Remember: SBG doesn’t average grades. We’re supposed to elevate what the student can demonstrate at the end of the experience. I like that, too. What does that mean for a transcript - that only the marks they earn senior year count? A 4-year average would be hypocritical to the very system being imposed. **Stop the madness. The 2020 deadline is not common sense. We still don’t know how to help disadvantaged students, students with special needs, and ELL students to meet the standards.**

Demand evidence that student performance is improving. Demand evidence that students are becoming more skillful and more knowledgeable graduates because of SBG. We’re at a spot where we can ask tough questions and perhaps drastically change where we’re going as a State. Who is in charge of quality control like my dad was with space food? I believe in graduating at least partially based on standards—I have believed in high standards most of my life, and my country and state need the best. The mistake made was to attach grades to the standards. **Report on the standards through the PLP system** - not through the grading system. Saves a ton of money, too. How do I know a mistake was made? Students aren’t talking about standards; their world is the grade. They don’t want to meet the standards...because they want a ‘4’ which means “exceeds the standards” which in most schools is equivalent to an A+. Teachers worked hard trying to define a ‘3’ for each target - and they want a ‘4’.

“Stop the Madness”

Wow - no one saw *that* coming? So, we have vague definitions for 4's when common sense should be: **are they achieving the standard or not?** Why did we pollute standards by aligning them to grades? Because we aligned them to grades, students can earn a “1” and pass the class. UGH. That's not what we wanted. **They either achieve the standard or haven't yet achieved the standard.**

I like what the AOE is doing: creating the profile of a Vermont High School Graduate. Once that work is completed, **make every high school measure itself against that Profile.**

I want the AOE to have more teeth. Rep. Long may not like my thought here, but I'm tired of hearing “local control” when administration or a school board makes a decision that is not aligned with common sense. Graduation standards are all over the place. Some schools don't require reading as a standard. Can you imagine? All schools are required to have standards for transferable skills AND content, but some schools seem to be resisting content standards. Some advocates for SBG talk about “rich content” but don't honor content. I've heard so much bad talk about the word ‘content’ that I've changed the discussion to “knowledge.” Certainly everyone must agree that we want graduates who are knowledgeable about the Constitution, the Second Amendment, Climate, Nature, Food, Biology, a certain level of math, the Flag, maple trees, food, business, the Holocaust, the sacrifices made for us all, technology, fitness, fire safety, the gift of a free press, water cleanup, economics, medicine, space...**knowledge, when taught well, inspires.** We need to make sure to keep knowledge in the diploma.

Kids can't be graduating from our schools based on poor data. And I don't believe we will ever be calibrated - it'll take way too much time and money, and the calibration will have to be from one grade to the next. A freshman asked me in Advisory, “Since I have a ‘4’ in everything, can I graduate?” I said No, a ‘4’ in Freshman math/science/English is not a ‘4’ in advanced math/science/English. How the heck are we going to make sense of THAT? We're not ready for 2020.

My students need math interventionists and reading interventionists and behavior interventionists - not SBG and SBG coaches or an administrator in the Central Office who has to spend precious time working on SBG. Make no mistake about it: SBG is *expensive*.

Work with Vermont-NEA to help find out what is working with students and what is NOT worth the time and effort. The NEA is not the enemy; most teachers are like me = we will knock ourselves out for students, but we have to know it's worth all the money, time, and effort, and we are concerned about equity.

Communicate clearly what data the state wants.

Stop the madness.

Kentucky has probably been doing SBG longer than any other state. I'm sorry, but are we hearing that students from Kentucky are excellent writers, thinkers, speakers, workers? I'm not hearing anything. My guess is that they have nothing to brag about because not much has changed: the student results are about the same. All that work, and for what?

“Stop the Madness”

We are each a story. We're not numbers - my students are NOT numbers...especially uncalibrated, inflated numbers. It's become the stock market at school: students and parents are watching the grade program like someone watches the stock market ticker - did the grade go up? Down? **Stop the madness.**

There was a time when our coaches handed a large paper to us that they called the “Big Blue Head.” I almost died. The head is only part of what we're working with; I'm working with a soul, a heart, a collection of dreams, a past that might be riddled with trauma. I'm dealing with families and their struggles. I'll be damned if I allow SBG to turn my students into a number of data points.

These are human beings that are developing their stories. I've always said that if students give me their heart, I can get their minds. They need to *want* to learn...and they need to take ownership of their story.

Why aren't students rebelling? Many share negative thoughts about our program, but they are too busy with life to try and fix what the adults are doing. In addition, it's now MUCH easier to pass a class, so why complain? It's also easier to earn an A+ than it ever has been, so why complain? Homework has become optional. We were led to believe that students would still do the practice at home. But one student shared, “High school students don't do their homework for fun or practice. We do it because we know it will affect our grade.”

We tried this out - took it for a long ride and kicked the tires. Let's now talk about what to keep and what to throw away. Every penny counts. Value every minute of a person's life. I'm sick by how much of my life SGB consumes. Let's develop a system that allows students to *own* their story. Let's be equitable. Let's do our homework. Let's be compassionate to the Vermont students and school systems who can't afford SBG. Use common sense. It's simply the Vermont way.

Again, thanks for your service and the invitation.