

# Standards and Assessment Bulletin

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## In this issue

Field Notes	1, 4
Building Assessment Literacy	2
From the Mailbag : Question of the Day	3
Data Grab : Statistic of the Day	3
Odds & Ends	5

## Field Notes

In-depth explorations of innovation in schools



### Making the Grade at B.F.A. St. Albans

Jeff Rouleau has had a change of heart. Until recently, Rouleau, a high school science teacher at B.F.A. St. Albans, followed a relatively traditional grading policy. Students who did poorly on assignments or assessments were given grades that reflected their performance. Students who did not turn in assignments on time were given zeros. Grades, therefore, represented students' mastery of the subject matter as well as their level of dependability and productivity. But that has all changed. Rouleau has completely revamped his policy on grading and is encouraging his colleagues at the high school to consider doing the same.

So how have his grading habits changed? For one, no student will ever receive a failing grade on an assignment or assessment in his class again; students must meet the standard. For each assessment, Rouleau determines the minimum score that he feels reflects a student's mastery of the material or concept. Those who fail to reach this threshold the first time around are given support and opportunities to re-assess, either entire tests or portions, in order to demonstrate mastery of the intended outcomes. Similarly Rouleau does not assign zeros to students who miss deadlines but gives them additional chances to submit assignments or take tests. As a result, assessments in his class do not assess reliability or productivity but reflect, purely and simply, students' mastery of academic content standards. Students are free to make up work during lunch or after school. Rouleau attempts to be available as much as possible to his classes to accommodate what can be hectic high school schedules.

Why the shift? Rouleau credits his change of heart to his involvement in the reform model *Breaking Ranks* at his school as well as a course he took on differentiated instruction. These experiences, he said, forced him to ask himself a difficult but important question, "What are my priorities as a teacher?" He decided that his number one priority was ensuring that his students met academic standards. While he says he felt like "a decent teacher," he knew he was not ensuring the success of all of his students because he allowed some of them to receive failing grades. He felt as though his assessment and grading policies implicitly accepted student failure.

On the flip side, Rouleau worried about the students who passed his courses. He questioned what it really meant to receive credit in one of his classes. Could he say without a doubt that those students who received credit met the standard in that subject and learned everything they needed to learn to be successful in the content area? He decided he could not answer that with much confidence. As a result of his new assessment and grading policy, Rouleau now knows that every student who receives credit in his classes has mastered the material and met the standard.

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