To Whom It May Concern:

As researchers studying the challenges and outcomes of standards-based assessment and grading practices at the secondary level, we have had the opportunity to interview a large number of school and district administrators involved in this work. Based on our observations of, and conversations regarding, the Des Moines Public Schools' initiative, we would like to offer our admiration and support for the district's impressive and ambitious efforts. Like many in our profession, we've become increasingly concerned in recent years over the number of high school graduates who are unprepared for college and careers, as well as how far our students lag behind those in other countries. Progressive districts that base their practices on clearly defined learning standards can improve instruction, assessment and reporting. Standards-referenced grading—a logical extension of that process—allows teachers to provide clearer, more effective feedback when compared to traditional grading.

Traditional report cards no longer offer enough detail to answer the critical question: "How well is my child learning?" Our current grading system is more than a century old and does not have a meaningful body of research to support it. This is no longer acceptable: Parents need to know their child's strengths and areas for growth, as well as interventions that can be undertaken at home to promote success.

The most important objective of grades is to provide information or feedback to students and parents. Research has shown that providing specific feedback about students' standing in terms of learning goals significantly increased their achievement. Guskey (2011), studying standards-based programs, found teachers and families unanimous in their agreement that standards-based reports provided better and clearer information. Thus, it is our belief that standards-referenced grading, when intentionally applied, is a defensible system for fair, accurate, and meaningful assessment of student work.

However, parents sometimes express concerns that standards-based grading might pose a threat to their children's post-secondary opportunities. Administrators in standards-based districts that we've studied report conversations with university admissions personnel, who acknowledge that traditional grades are not always reliable indicators of collegiate success. They note that student records are often dealt with manually, since there are many grading systems that vary widely among the high schools they work with. They commend standards-based schools for removing variables that inflate grades and providing reports that more accurately represent learning. Ultimately, perhaps, one principal we spoke with said it best: "I tell parents all the time, 'Your child will get into

college if that's what he or she aspires to, but that's not why we're here—we're here to make sure they get *through* college.'"

Much of the aversion to standards-based grading is related to our familiarity with traditional letter grades—anyone who might be reading this is likely to be a product of that system—and perhaps fear of the unknown. But there needs to be a trust in, and respect for, the profound lessons that have come out of standards-based models. Teachers are reporting improved relationships with students and parents, and empowered students who take greater responsibility for their own learning, improve their academic performance, and become better prepared for life after high school. To successfully build on this mission, we need to recognize that this essential objective of education—to have ongoing, constructive conversations about our children learning for a lifetime—is the *right* work.

In conclusion, we again applaud DMPS for its decision to become part of the leading edge of a transition toward this well-supported, increasingly applied model. In particular, there appears to be great promise in implementing the model to scale as a large, urban district, as it appears to hold the potential to lessen the achievement gap for underserved students. If there is anything that we as university faculty charged with preparing the next generation of educators and educational leaders can do to further support these efforts, please know that we would be open to the discussion.

Sincerely,

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