

Title: High school grading policies and best practices

Date: September 2015

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Question: >> Please provide information on high school instructor grading policies and best practices to better ensure that grades are based on content mastery.

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### Response:

We have prepared the following memo with information on high school instructor grading policies and best practices to ensure that grade assignment is based on content mastery. Citations include a link to a free online version, when available. All citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the document, except where noted. We have not done an evaluation of the methodological rigor of these resources, but provide them for your information only.

### References

Allen, J. (2005). Grades as valid measures of academic achievement of classroom learning. *The Clearing House*, 78(5), 218–223. Retrieved on August 6, 2015, from <http://www.tcnj.edu/~senate/resources/documents/GradesasValidMeasures.pdf>

*Abstract:* In this article, the author discusses the purpose of grades from a perspective based on the fundamental educational psychology assessment principle of validity—the validity of what learning is being assessed and the validity of the communication of that assessment to others. He believes most teachers fail to give grades to students that are as valid as they should be. Because grading is something that has been done to each of them during their many years as students, it is hard to change the invalid “grading” schema that has become embedded in their minds. Now, as educators often required to grade students, and because of this embedded schema, they often grade students in invalid ways similar to how they were graded. Inadequate education in valid assessment and grading principles and practices is a reason many teachers continue to perpetuate invalid grading practices with students. Since educational testing and assessment is a major content knowledge area in educational psychology, the issues regarding assessment and grading that he addresses in this article could well be addressed in an educational psychology course. If their preservice and in-service teachers are going to learn appropriate assessment and grading practices then educational psychologists need to provide the relevant information in their classes.

Carifio, J., & Carey, T. (2013). The arguments and data in favor of minimum grading. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 25(4), 19–30. Retrieved on August 10, 2015, from <http://www.mwera.org/MWER/volumes/v25/issue4/v25n4-Carifio-Carey-POINT-COUNTERPOINT-SECTION.pdf>

*Abstract:* The arguments for and against minimum grading systems have grown increasingly more intense and acrimonious in the past decade. However, there has been an absence of empirical data,

theory and clear comparative analyses of conflicting points of view. Critics of minimum grading contend that the practice will produce grade inflation and social promotions of “those students receiving minimum grades” as the two chief arguments against minimum grading practices. In our retrospective study, we found no evidence of grade inflation or social promotion of those students receiving minimum grades in a large urban High School using a school-wide “macro” minimum grading system over a seven-year period. We also found most of the benefits posited by minimum grading theory, including students who received minimum grades doing significantly better on state exams than would be predicted by the overall GPA’s with the opposite results being true for the other students in this High School. The far-reaching implications of these results for educators looking to implement fairer and more accurate student assessment are discussed here, including the documented benefits of minimum grading as sound educational and grading policy, and the need of a minimum-grading component in any sound grading system.

Erickson, J. A. (2011). How grading reform changed our school. *Educational Leadership*, 11(6), 66–70. Retrieved on August 6, 2015, from <https://www.ocps.net/lc/southwest/mso/parents/Documents/How%20Grading%20Reform%20Changed%20Our%20School.pdf>

*Excerpt:* At Minnetonka High School, a suburban school serving nearly 2,900 students in Minnetonka, Minnesota, the need for grading reform became evident in the early 2000s. Parents were calling for more transparency and consistency. Teacher surveys revealed that the purpose for grading varied from classroom to classroom and that teachers were using a wide range of factors to determine grades. Attendance, behavior, effort, extra credit, and participation were all in the mix along with actual achievement of curriculum standards. We needed to articulate a clear focus for grading. Changing our school’s grading practices required that we take a fundamental look at one guiding question: What should go into a grade? Our answer: Grades should reflect only what a student knows and is able to do. This principle became the impetus for our work. As we analyzed our policies and procedures, we discovered many practices that were either inflating or deflating grades.

Guskey, T. R. (2000). Grading policies that work against standards...and how to fix them. *NASSP Bulletin*, 84(620), 20–29. Retrieved on August 5, 2015, from <https://www.minnetonkacommunityed.org/academics/gradingandreporting/Documents/GradingarticleGUSKEY.pdf>

*Abstract:* An important element of a successful standards-based reform initiative includes grading and reporting that refers to specific learning criteria rather than normative criteria. Four grading policies that impose barriers to reform are described. Specific strategies to correct these policies are offered.

Guskey, T. R., & Bailey, J. M. (2001). *Developing grading and reporting systems for student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Available for purchase at <http://www.corwin.com/books/Book9645>

*Book description:* Teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members all agree that we need better grading and reporting systems. Often, these systems are inadequate because they are part of a tradition that can go unexamined and unquestioned for years. Here is the first serious look at the issue, written to provide all those involved—especially teachers—with a coherent and thoughtful framework. Guskey and Bailey offer four pillars of successful grading and reporting systems:

- Communication is the primary goal of grading and reporting
- Grading and reporting are integral parts of the instructional process
- Good reporting is based on good evidence

- Creating change in grading and reporting requires creating a multi-faceted reporting system

Written to help readers develop a deeper and more reflective understanding of the various aspects of the subject, Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey's work brings organization and clarity to a murky and disagreement-filled topic. This is a practical and essential guide for teachers, administrators or anyone concerned with understanding and implementing best practices in grading and reporting systems.

Hanover Research. (2011). *Effective grading practices in the middle school and high school environments*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved on August 5, 2015, from [http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/va01000586/centricity/domain/63/hanover\\_research\\_-\\_effective\\_grading\\_practices\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_school\\_and\\_high\\_school\\_environments.pdf](http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/va01000586/centricity/domain/63/hanover_research_-_effective_grading_practices_in_the_middle_school_and_high_school_environments.pdf)

*Abstract:* In this report, Hanover Research examines commonly recommended grading practices for middle school and high school teachers. Specifically, this report discusses standards-based grading, a practice that is growing in popularity. This report reviews the academic and anecdotal literature on which grading practices are deemed effective and which grading practices are ineffective. Included is a discussion of teacher, student, and parent reactions to standards-based grading systems and examples of how standards-based programs have been implemented in a number of U.S. middle and high schools.

Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Available for purchase at <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/100053.aspx>

*Book description:* Grading can be an invaluable tool for pinpointing strengths and weaknesses in students' understanding, provide a shared language for discussing learning, and help improve student performance over time. Unfortunately, current practices in classroom grading, such as the use of overall letter grades or percentage scores, are not amenable to this type of specific feedback. In fact, they do little more than label learning at periodic intervals. The antiquated grading system in use today has little or no research to support its continuation and is highly ineffective.

*Transforming Classroom Grading* presents viable alternatives. It is about designing grading systems that are both precise and efficient. Robert Marzano provides educators with a thorough grounding in grading research and theory. After clarifying the basic purposes of grades, he discusses what should be included in them, how to use a rubric-based approach to assessment and reporting, how to compute final topic scores and final grades, and how technology can streamline the grading process. He also addresses seven types of assessment, which, when coordinated, can provide a comprehensive view of student understanding and skill. Finally, he suggests alternatives to report cards with overall grades and ways to phase in their use. The changes that Marzano recommends will require persistent—even courageous—educators, but those who systematically implement them will fundamentally change the way teachers, students, and parents think about and use grading. This book provides explicit guidance for those teachers, schools, and districts ready for true change.

Marzano, R. J., & Heflebower, T. (2011). *Grades that show what students know: Best practices suggest four ways to make the most of standards-based grading and reporting*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Retrieved on August 7, 2015, from <https://www.ocps.net/lc/southwest/mso/parents/Documents/Grades%20That%20Show%20What%20Students%20Know.pdf>

*Excerpt:* Standards-based grading and reporting have been topics of discussion for years, primarily because of the current system's shortcomings. In the traditional system, students acquire points for various activities, assignments, and behaviors, which accrue throughout a grading period. The teacher adds up the points and assigns a letter grade. A variation on this theme is to keep track of percentage scores across various categories of performance and behavior and then translate the

average percentage score into a letter grade or simply report the average percentage score (for example, 62.9 percent). These practices provide little useful information about a specific student. A student might have received an overall or “omnibus” letter grade of B, not because he had a solid grasp of the target content, but because he was exceptionally well behaved in class, participated in all discussions, and turned in all assignments on time. Likewise, a student may have received a percentage score of 62.9, not because she displayed significant gaps in understanding regarding the target content, but because she received a zero for tardiness on assignments or for disruptive behavior. In addition to this lack of specificity, one teacher’s criteria for assigning a letter grade of A, for example, might be equivalent to another teacher’s criteria for assigning a letter grade of B, or even lower. In an effort to cure the ills of current grading and reporting systems, many schools and districts across the United States have attempted to implement a standards-based system. We have four recommendations regarding best practices in this area.

Miller, J. J. (2013). A better grading system: Standards-based, student-centered assessment. *English Journal*, 103(1), 111–118. Retrieved on August 7, 2015, from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EJ/1031-sep2013/EJ1031Better.pdf>

*Abstract:* The author discusses the benefits of a standards-based, student-centered approach to assessment.

Moore, B. (n.d.). *Effective grading practices: 12 fixes for broken grades*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved on August 7, 2015, from <http://www.tcdss.net/docs/B.%20Moore%20-%2012%20Fixes%20for%20Broken%20Grades.pdf>

*Excerpt:* Weaknesses in current grading systems include:

- Students can earn an A in a course and never complete anything but basic level work
- Teachers lack effective ways to get students to complete work at high levels; teachers grade and record whatever work is turned in
- Current grading systems provide students with the option of not doing their assignments at all; the only consequence to not doing work is that they don’t have to do the work
- Most grading policies purposefully (or not) assess behaviors instead of level of achievement or proficiency on standards...

How can standards-based grading help?

- Clear, accurate feedback
- Consistent focus on learning rather than compliance
- Communicates readiness for the next level
- Promotes a better match between grades and standardized or state assessments results
- Leads to a culture that motivates all students to achieve

O’Connor, K. (2007). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades*. Portland, OR: Educational Testing Service. Available for purchase from <http://www.amazon.com/Repair-Kit-Grading-Assessment-Institute/dp/0132488639>

*Book description:* Communicating about student achievement requires accurate, consistent and meaningful grades. Educators interested in examining and improving grading practices should ask the following questions:

- Am I confident that students in my classroom receive consistent, accurate and meaningful grades that support learning?
- Am I confident that the grades I assign students accurately reflect my school or district’s published performance standards and desired learning outcomes?

In many schools, the answers to these questions often range from “not very” to “not at all.” When that’s the case, grades are “broken” and teachers and schools need a “repair kit” to fix them. A *Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades*, 2/e gives teachers and administrators 15 ways to make the necessary repairs. The “fixes” are in four categories that reflect common grading challenges: distorted achievement, low-quality or poorly organized evidence, inappropriate grade calculation and linking grades more closely to student learning. Student achievement isn’t only about “doing the work” or accumulating points. But, when students receive points for merely turning in work on time, or when teachers put a mark on everything students do and simply count them up to determine a grade, the message is clear: success is determined by the quantity of points earned, not the quality of the learning taking place. In fact, messages about learning quality get lost. Grades are artifacts of learning, and students need to receive grades that reflect what they’ve actually learned. That’s why this book advocates the implementation of grading systems based strictly on student achievement— and shows educators how to create them.

Rauschenberg, S. (2014). How consistent are course grades? An examination of differential grading. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(92), 41. Retrieved on August 10, 2015, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1265>

*Abstract:* Differential grading occurs when students in courses with the same content and curriculum receive inconsistent grades across teachers, schools, or districts. It may be due to many factors, including differences in teacher grading standards, district grading policies, student behavior, teacher stereotypes, teacher quality, and curriculum adherence. If it occurs systematically, certain types of students may receive higher or lower grades relative to other students, despite having similar content mastery or ability. Using three years of statewide data on Algebra I and English I courses in North Carolina public high schools, I find that student characteristics are stronger predictors of differential grading than teacher, school, or district characteristics. Female, Limited English Proficient, and 12th grade students earn statistically significant higher grades than other students, holding test scores and student, teacher, school, and district characteristics constant. Low-income students, conversely, earn lower grades than other students, all else constant. With the exception of Algebra I low-income students, these differences are large enough to move a student one grade category on a plus/minus 7-point A-F grading scale. Black students earn higher Algebra I grades but lower English I grades than white or Asian students with the same test score, but these effect sizes are smaller than other student characteristics. Interactions between student and teacher race and gender yielded small estimates that were not consistent between subjects.

REL Northeast & Islands. (2013). *Standards-based grading: Research and new approaches*. Waltham, MA: Author. Retrieved on August 8, 2015, from <http://www.relnei.org/news/bridge-event-standards-based-grading.html>

*Excerpt:* On May 30, the [Northeast College and Career Readiness Research Alliance](#) (NCCRA) hosted a Bridge Event to explore the research on grading and to learn new approaches to making grading policies more effective and reflective of student mastery of learning.

## Methods

### Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search

“Grading policies” AND “content mastery”; “high school grading policies”; “grading reform”; “standards-based grading policies”; “effective grading policies”

### Search of Databases

EBSCO Host, Google, and Google Scholar

### Criteria for Inclusion

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

- **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
- **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
- **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the Western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.