



**A Call
to Action**

**Transforming
Grading
Practices**

■ *Jeffrey A. Erickson*

Grading practices that award a zero for late or incomplete work or for poor academic integrity do not teach or motivate students.

Transformative grading practices include a focus on learning, not behavior; meaningful feedback; and high-quality summative assessments.

Policies must include a plan for students who do not perform well so they are able to learn .



Recently at dinner, my six-year-old daughter asked, “What’s a gradebook?” Puzzled by her sudden interest in grading, my wife and I tried to explain and, seeing that she was worried about our answer, asked her why she was concerned about grades. My daughter told us that she was missing an assignment and that she would receive a zero if she didn’t turn it in soon. Even after my wife’s and my explanation, I doubt that our daughter has a clear understanding of the impact of a zero, but she certainly understands that receiving no points is bad and that receiving more points is better.

Most students are like my daughter. At a very early age, they learn the point system and how school can be about the accumulation of points, not the accumulation of knowledge and skills. Grading systems are pervasive in districts across the nation, with questionable results. For example, a southern school district was highlighted in a 2009 Associated Press story for selling test points as a fundraiser—\$20 for 20 points, a practice the district quickly halted (Associated Press, 2009). Although this is certainly a creative way to increase revenue, it does little to improve student learning and creates an environment focused on winners—those with lots of points—and losers—those with few.

Taking Inventory

In schools across the United States, planning is well underway for the upcoming year. This is the prime time to assess your school’s grading practice. Guskey wrote, “Often in grading...we continue to use old policies and practices, not because of their proven merit, but simply because, ‘we’ve always done it that way’ and never asked, ‘why?’” (Guskey & Bailey, 2009, p. 3).

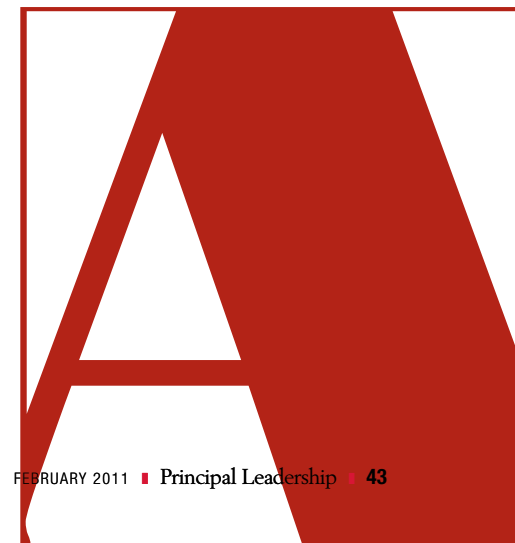
To start the conversation of “why” in your building, take an inventory of your grading practices. Do they:

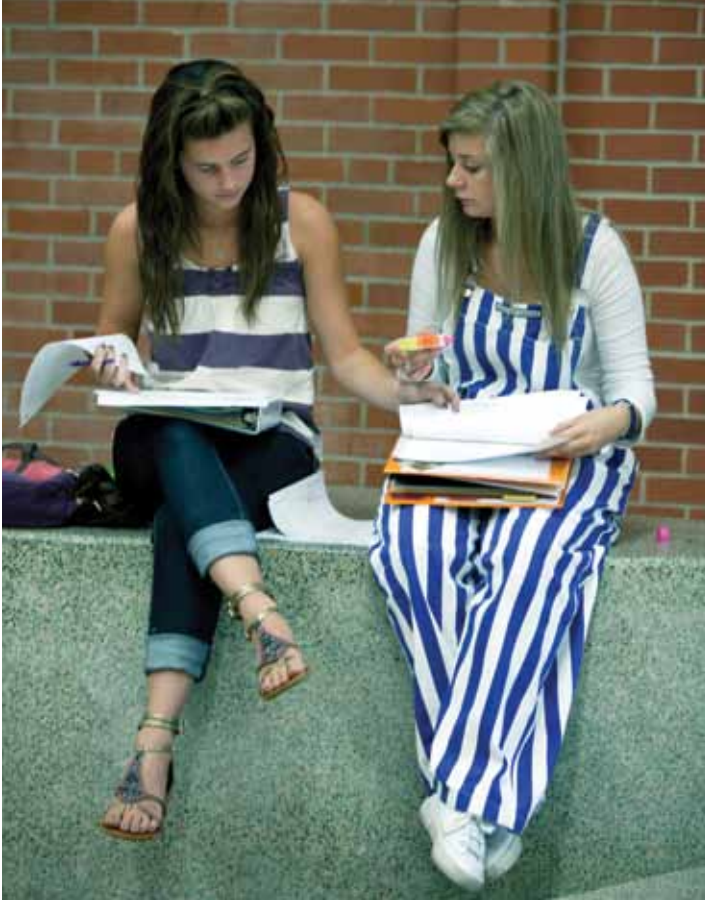
- Focus on learning by providing meaningful feedback?
- Allow students to make mistakes during the learning process and still recover?

Behavior Connected to a Grade

In an article for the March 2010 issue of *Principal Leadership*, I wrote about Minnetonka Public Schools’ efforts to change its grading practices. (See “Grading Practices: The Third Rail.”) During the development of our new grading policy, we addressed and reformed our use of the zero, extra credit, nonacademic factors, and a host of other

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issues. Vigorous debate centered on answering two essential questions:

- What goes into a grade?
- How do we report it out?

Now in our fourth year of implementation, our practices continue to evolve.

LATE WORK

Marcie wants to hand in an essay one day late. What happens in many schools? In many cases, the teacher says, “Well, I am sorry. I don’t accept late work.” So often a zero is the penalty for not completing an assignment, a project, or a test. This is generally done in the name of teaching students about the “real world.”

Let’s take a closer look at the real world. Did you forget to file your taxes by April 15? If you did, the government didn’t say, “Forget that money you owe us.” Instead, it requires you to submit not only the original amount but also an additional amount as a penalty. In the real world, failure to complete a task rarely results in not needing to complete the task.

◀ *Students know that the work they do will be evaluated fairly and meaningfully.*

Educators in Minnetonka Public Schools agree with the IRS: a consequence for not completing work by the due date should be doing it. Although we certainly want students to learn the importance of submitting work on time, we know that by automatically assigning a zero or 50% to late work, students feel little incentive to complete late assignments. Motivating students with zero rarely works and, in the end, causes students to give up. “No studies support the use of low grades or marks as punishments.... Instead [it] causes students to withdraw from learning,” wrote Guskey and Bailey (2001, pp. 34–35). Receiving two zeros in a nine-week term may end any hope of recovery. Yet the zero is still used today.

As we work to ensure that grades reflect what a student knows and is able to do, we have designed a set of protocols for handling late work that is consistent for all secondary teachers. Students who do not complete an assessment by the due date have one more chance to submit the work by a drop dead date—generally a few days to a week after the assignment was originally due—for a 10% grade reduction. Although students receive a consequence, it is minimal and does not distort their grade. Major summative assessment work is accepted up to the last day of the quarter.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Giving students a zero for cheating is a quick punishment, but recording a zero in the gradebook does not give the student or the teacher any information about what the student knows and is able to do. The teacher and the student should engage in a meaningful dialogue that allows the teacher to diagnose the student’s reasons for cheating. In the end, the consequence for cheating is that students still need to do the work.

Plagiarism is another behavior that often carries an insurmountable academic consequence. Consider what happens to Mike in ninth grade when an essay he submits is flagged for plagiarism. When Mike’s teacher confronts him, their conversation centers on the consequence of receiving a zero without discussing why Mike’s essay is considered plagiarism. In the end, Mike fails the assignment and ends up getting

a D in the class. That D is factored into Mike's GPA until he graduates from high school. One incident continues to punish Mike for four years—a mistake from which he can never recover.

The old model of ensuring academic integrity focuses on punishment—the zero—and leaves individual teachers working in isolation to defend it. In our system, when a student cheats, there are consequences, including community service, ethics studies, and loss of privileges. (At the high school level, all one need say is “parking permit” and miracles happen!) When a student displays poor academic integrity, the focus is on learning from the mistake; determining the root cause of it; and working as a team with parents, teachers, principals, and the student to make sure it doesn't happen again.

HOMWORK

In many schools, homework is graded on the basis of whether or not it is completed—fill in the blank and earn all the points. In a three-week unit, a student may earn 10 out of 10 points on every homework assignment. Technology allows parents to access this data and believe that their children are making academic progress—until the final test arrives and their children fail. After more carefully looking at homework “assessments,” parents understand that the grades are primarily based on effort and do not provide meaningful feedback to anyone.

In Minnetonka Public Schools, formative assessments can be no more than 15% of a student's quarter grade; generally, homework falls into this category. Although formative assessments carry little weight, they contain the most vital information for students and parents. They show students' learning in real time. When we decided to limit the weight of formative assessment, teachers expressed the concern that students would stop completing daily assignments because they were worth so little. Yet the scores on the summative assessments were strong. This has caused a critical analysis of homework in our buildings: do daily assessments support the learning goals for the unit? As our practices evolve, true formative assessments—ones that provide feedback to students and teachers—are becoming part of the culture in Minnetonka's schools.

Quality Assessments

In our system, at least 85% of students' quarter grades must be based on summative assessments that are aligned with the course standards. When schools eliminate many of the nonacademic items that are often factored into grades, what they have left are assessments, so those assessments must be of the highest quality. High-quality assessments—performance-based and written—are designed by a team of teachers and include questions that push students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate—similar to the much-renowned 21st century skills.

When we first told parents that assessments would compose at least 85% of their children's grades, they were immediately concerned that entire grades would be determined by multiple-choice tests. To prepare for the new policy, teachers in each department identified different types of assessments—such as

▼ *Summative assessments include such performance-based tasks as lab experiments.*





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projects, essays, presentations, tests, and labs—that they would use. At the start of each school year, teachers tell students about the various types of assessments that they will complete to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. To ensure that grades are not compromised by a single poor assessment, students must complete a minimum of four summative assessments every nine weeks, and one must be something other than a traditional paper-and-pencil test.

Students Who Don’t Get It—Yet

What happens when all of the formative assessments and the final summative assessment are well constructed and reveal that the student still doesn’t get it? Retakes are a one option, but asking the same questions in the same way again doesn’t teach much. The old philosophy, “I taught it, and they just didn’t learn it” must be replaced with the question, “Now what?” We’ve all heard students say, “I just can’t get it.” But the truth is that they haven’t gotten it yet. If the assessments prove that a student didn’t get it, the teacher must take a close look at why not and what steps can be

◀ If a student needs to retake an assessment, additional instruction must occur.

taken to ensure that the student does get it.

In Minnetonka, there are two key prerequisites for retakes: First, there must be some additional instruction and practice between the first and second assessment. Students are not permitted to simply show up for a retake and hope for the best. Second, if a retake is offered and the student scores an A, that is the second score that is recorded—there is no penalty. If grades are intended to accurately reflect what a student knows and is able to do, recording anything other than the precise score that a student earns is inappropriate.

Call to Action

I am frequently asked whether Minnetonka’s new grading system requires more work on the part of our teachers. It isn’t more work—it is *different* work and it is the right work to help students succeed. In the end, the test of any grading policy is for the teacher to analyze each grade at the end of the term. If the grade accurately represents what the student knows, the policy works.

Do you and your staff members need to reevaluate the grading practices in your school before the year concludes? Simply discussing grading practices transforms a school by inspiring teachers to do even better work in the areas of grading and assessment. But if you’re waiting for your teachers to commit to new grading practices before making any changes to the old ones, you will have a long wait. Remind them that the stakes for not making any changes are high. In every term that passes, more students receive zeros or are harmed by unfair and ineffective grading practices. **PL**

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