

What's Worth Fighting Against in Grading?

Four common grading practices can hurt students and erode instructional culture.

Douglas Reeves, Lee Ann Jung, and Ken O'Connor

In his classic book *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship?*, Michael Fullan (2008) identified a dozen action items for principals and school systems that remain as relevant today as they were almost a decade ago. In particular, his clarion calls was to “de-privatize teaching” and to “elevate and invest in instructional leadership of the principal” (p. 58). But although there is now no scarcity of administrators, coaches, and other staff who have acquired titles suggesting instructional leadership, it is still difficult to find examples of instructors being led through a coherent set of policies and practices that routinely improve student achievement.

We find this disconnect particularly glaring in the area of grading. Whether the issue is classroom scores on daily work or final report card grades with consequences for scholarship

opportunities and university admissions, grading remains the wild west of school improvement, in which policy coherence is more apparent in claims than in practice and anyone armed with a red pen can make decisions with devastating instructional consequences.

Although we don't encourage micromanagement of school grading policies, we insist that Fullan is right that there are a number of things school leaders should fight for—or against. And we are not bothered by the terminology's suggestion of entering into conflict. No professional educator would hesitate to fight for the safety of a student, or to protect a child from physical harm. Some commonly used grading policies, we believe, rise to this level of urgency in that they threaten the emotional well-being and academic outcomes of children. Even the discourse sometimes used to



justify noxious grading policies—“getting them ready for the real world”—is eerily akin to the rhetoric of corporal punishment.

We recognize that educators have a wide range of perspectives on grading and can often find researchers to support alternative points of view. But we focus here on four areas in which the evidence is clear and the consequences of inaction are grave (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2015; O’Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2016): the use of the average, or arithmetic mean, to calculate a final grade; the grading of practice, or homework; the use of the zero on the 100-point scale; and the use of grading as punishment for misbehavior. Individually and collectively, these practices result in inaccurate measures and encourage students to see school as being about compliance and points accumulation rather than learning.

We realize there are plenty of other questionable grading practices. But we have seen overly ambitious grading-reform initiatives stopped dead in their tracks because of the overwhelming and threatening nature of the changes. In focusing on four commonly used grading policies as

first-line priorities for schools, our aim is to avoid sacrificing progress on the altar of perfection.

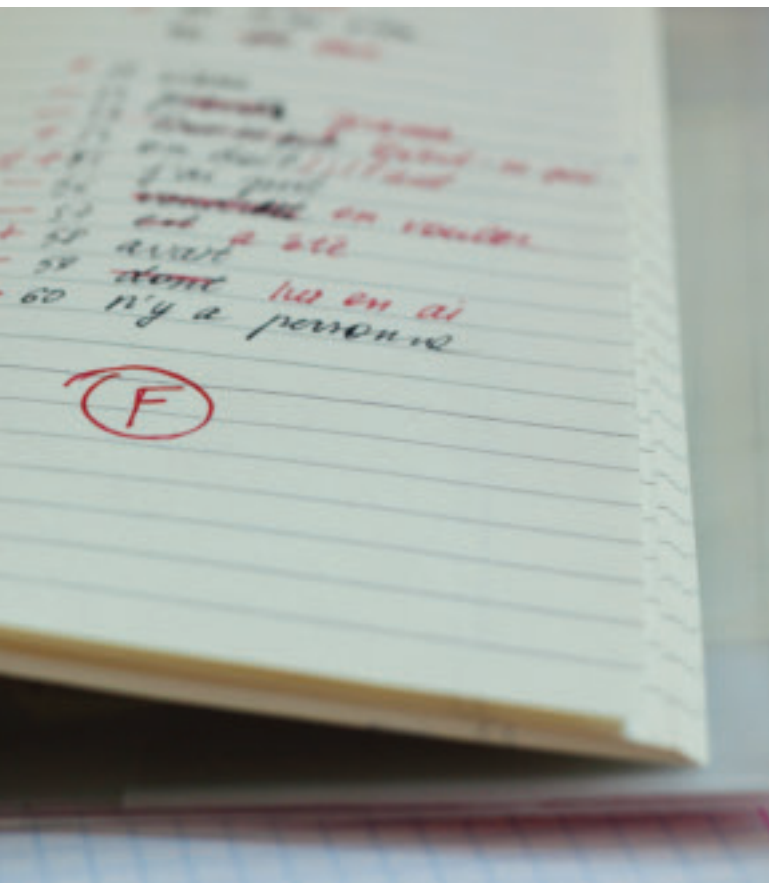
Use of the Average

There is no assessment in the real world that matters—not licensing tests for driving or performing brain surgery, not professional exams for becoming an engineer, pilot, hairdresser, or nuclear reactor safety official—that relies on an average of performances. To calculate a grading average across time is to engage in the fantasy that proficient individuals never make mistakes or, more likely, that their mistakes are counterproductive. Watch any toddler learning to walk, and it is clear that mistakes are the engine of success. To say the toddler should get a poor grade in walking because of her many spectacular failures along the way would be ridiculous. She eventually got there. She mastered the skill.

A grading system that persistently punishes mistakes instead of rewarding eventual progress and mastery guarantees the stagnation of learning.

One rationale for the use of the average in calculating a final score appears to be that good students get things right the first time. But this is not true, except in cases where students aren’t challenged. When the curriculum is rigorous, all students make mistakes, but the most successful students always learn from those mistakes. To average indicators of the students’ performance across time is to neglect this facet of the learning process. It’s tantamount to saying that we don’t care whether our teaching had any impact on learning, or that how students performed early on will always matter. Do we really believe this?

A grading system that persistently punishes mistakes instead of rewarding eventual progress and mastery guarantees the stagnation of learning. By contrast, a grading system that emphasizes a student’s current performance or most recent evidence of achievement gives students a reason to keep trying. Not only do students deserve a grade that reflects their achievements, but teachers deserve credit for their accomplishment in delivering effective instruction and interventions.



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Grading Homework

No one questions the value of practice. Musicians, athletes, geographers, mathematicians, and poets all practice their craft and, with coaching and support, improve their performance. The characteristics of what Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool (2016) call *gold standard* practice are consistent. Students must receive coaching and immediate descriptive feedback, proceed in incremental steps, and engage in practice that is specifically designed to help them get to the next level of skill, understanding, or knowledge.

The compulsion to grade homework is often based on the conviction that applying a score to practice, even when done in non-ideal conditions, will lead to better performance. In fact, this approach to homework leads to two types of negative outcomes—blindly compliant students who sullenly work at skills that rarely matter, and their even more sullen peers who work at nothing, unable even to approach the task because they can't do it independently. The first group finds school excruciatingly boring; the second group finds it humiliating. Students in neither group engage in authentic learning.

As Ericsson and Pool argue, exemplary practice is far from easy. But the absence of a grade does not imply the absence of rigor. Real rigor involves persistence, determination, resilience, and commitment to improvement—with the help of expert feedback that is far more demanding than markings of A+ or 100 percent.

The Zero on a 100-Point Scale

Teachers' right to give zeros for missing work has many staunch defenders who see it as a no-nonsense assertion of academic values. The most direct way to address this position is to ask colleagues who use the 100-point scale what the minimum number of points is that a student should earn

for work that earns an A, a B, a C, and so forth. Teachers in the United States typically respond with numbers roughly corresponding to 90, 80, 70, and 60. Why then does the mark for missing work—essentially an *F*—drop all the way down to zero? “It’s simple,” proponents of the practice contend. “No work, no credit.” But especially when combined with the averaging practices already discussed, a zero for missing work results in a grade that

Grading remains the wild west of school improvement.

does not accurately represent a student's achievement and from which he or she most likely will be unable to recover.

Recognizing the harm this policy can cause, some schools have responded with the *minimum 50* grading policy. The idea is that the interval between different grade levels should be equal, and therefore the interval between *D* and *F* (60 and 50) should be the same as the other intervals between higher grades. But this inevitably leads to the retort that students are “getting 50 points for doing nothing,” and school administrators and policymakers often beat a hasty retreat.

The more appropriate and more direct way to solve the problem is to return to the time-honored grade-point system in which *A* is 4, *B* is 3, *C* is 2, *D* is 1, and *F* is a zero. For this system to be mathematically consistent with the 100-point, zero-for-missing-work measure, a teacher would have to contend that while an *A* is 4 points, a *B* is 3 points, a *C* is 2 points, and a *D* is 1 point, a student's failure to turn in work should result in a score of *negative six*. We have collectively seen some outlandish grading

policies in our work, but, to the best of our knowledge, even the fiercest opponents of grading reform have not suggested this one.

So the solution is simple—implement the 4-point scale. We don't often see education reform initiatives that make teachers' jobs easier, but grading on a 4-point scale instead of a percentage-based scale is one such example. Win-win!

Grading Behavior and Late Work

Many classrooms continue to have policies that wield grades as punishment for behavioral issues, such as absences, tardiness, inappropriate conduct, and, most often, submitting late work. The fundamental problem with this approach is that it ignores the primary purpose of academic grades, which is to communicate information about student achievement with reference to *learning* goals. When grades are used to punish poor behavior, the true meaning of the grade becomes unclear because it is now an uncertain mix of achievement and behavior. A student who receives a *C* may have learned the content well but failed to submit homework or submitted assignments late. Conversely, the student may have demonstrated compliant behavior but failed to master the content. When indicators of behavior and achievement are combined in this way, we can no longer tell the difference.

Not only does including indicators of behavior in an achievement grade cause difficulties with interpreting the grade; it's also harmful to students' motivation and engagement. When grades are lowered because of late work or missing homework, especially if the penalties are severe, students can lose hope that they can catch up, which reduces their motivation to try.

We believe positive behaviors, including promptness, are important to teach, but consequences for behavior should directly address the behavior and not involve penalties that

affect students' academic grades. Students who submit work late don't need a markdown for their indiscretion; they need our support. If the work is important, it is better that it be done late than not done at all.

The appropriate response to late work is to provide places and times where students are *required* to complete the work. Some students may *want* to be punctual but have difficulty with executive functioning. Others may have lost interest in the content—or in school in general. Before we can address the behavior of turning work in late, we must understand why a student is experiencing this challenge. Time management and project management are skills to be learned, not inherent character traits. Our job is to use research-based practices to support these students, both academically and behaviorally.

In addition to supports that directly address behavior, schools and districts should include a limited number of behavioral marks in a separate section of the report card. This makes the clear statement that the behaviors are of such importance that they are brought to the forefront of the report. And doing so ensures that everyone involved has clear and accurate information about each student's academic achievement and behavior.

Starting Points for Grading Reform

The standards-based grading movement—which calls for the evaluation of student progress with respect to clearly delineated performance standards with a limited number of levels—has exposed consistent gaps between recommended grading practices and what is currently happening in schools. The sweeping changes that are needed have many educators and administrators wondering where to begin. But in their attempts to implement standards-based grading fully and quickly, some districts have faced harsh backlash from parents


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and school boards. Understandably, this leaves other school leaders apprehensive about making changes to grading policies.

The need to implement healthy grading practices is an urgent one; this action will benefit all learners, but especially those who are struggling. Even so, charging forward in a top-down fashion to change all grading practices at once can leave educators and families feeling unprepared and frustrated. It is preferable to establish practical starting points. By taking clear steps to eliminate averaging, achievement grades for homework, zeros on a 100-point scale, and grade penalties for late work, schools will be well on their way to more effective grading practices.

As school leaders take on each of these first four steps in grading reform, we recommend that they include educators and families in the discussion but remain firm about what is good for students. Educators and families will, rightfully, demand to know why these initiatives are necessary. Teachers will want to know what is so wrong with current grading practices. Families will want to know why schools are changing from the type of grades they are familiar with. Leaders must be prepared to answer these and the dozens of other questions that will arise. They will need to continue pushing their understanding forward by examining data and studying the full complexity

of issues of grading and assessment and how they affect student outcomes.

By staying engaged in the issues and informed by the literature, school leaders will be prepared to take on the next set of grading reform practices as their schools become ready. Implementing schoolwide or districtwide grading reform can be demanding work. But the serious problems with practices we describe are not controversial among the scholars of classroom assessment. Without question, this is the right work to do. 

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