Effective Grading Practices by Douglas B. Reeves DReeves@LeadandLearn.com.
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If you wanted to make just one change that would immediately reduce student failure rates, then the most effective place to start would be challenging prevailing grading practices. How can I be so sure? Try this experiment in your next faculty meeting. Ask your colleagues to calculate the final grade for a student who receives the following 10 grades during a semester: C, C, MA (Missing Assignment), D, C, B, MA, MA, B, A. I have done this experiment with thousands of teachers and administrators in the United States, Canada, and Argentina. Every time—bar none—I get the same results: The final grades range from F to A and include everything in between.

As this experiment demonstrates, the difference between failure and the honor roll often depends on the grading policies of the teacher. To reduce the failure rate, schools don't need a new curriculum, a new principal, new teachers, or new technology. They just need a better grading system.

Ineffective Grading

The results of my experiment are not surprising. Guskey and Bailey (2001) and Marzano (2000) have synthesized decades of research with similar findings. Neither the weight of scholarship nor common sense seems to have influenced grading policies in many schools. Practices vary greatly among teachers in the same school—and even worse, the practices best supported by research are rarely in evidence.

For example, the most effective grading practices provide accurate, specific, timely feedback designed to improve student performance (Marzano 2000, 2007; O'Connor, 2007). In the best classrooms, grades are only one of many types of feedback provided to students. Music teachers and athletic coaches routinely provide abundant feedback to students and only occasionally associate a grade with the feedback. Teachers in visual arts, drafting, culinary arts, or computer programming allow students to create a portfolio to show their best work, knowing that the mistakes made in the course of the semester were not failures, but lessons learned on the way to success. In each of these cases, "failures" along the way are not averaged into a calculation of the final grade.

Contrast these effective practices with three commonly used grading policies that are so ineffective they can be labeled as toxic. First is the use of zeroes for missing work. Despite evidence that grading as punishment does not work (Guskey, 2000) and the mathematical flaw in the use of the zero on a 100-point scale (Reeves, 2004), many teachers routinely maintain this policy in the mistaken belief that it will lead to improved student performance. Defenders of the zero claim that students need to have consequences for flouting the teacher's authority and failing to turn in work on time. They're right, but the appropriate consequence is not a zero; it's completing the work—before, during, or after school, during study periods, at "quiet tables" at lunch, or in other settings.

Second is the practice of using the average of all scores throughout the semester, a formula that presumes that the learning early in the semester is as important as learning at the end of the semester (Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2007). Interestingly, when teachers and administrators have been students in my graduate courses, they routinely insist that they should be evaluated on the basis of their understanding at the end of the semester rather

than their work throughout the term.

Third is the use of the "semester killer"—the single project, test, lab, paper, or other assignment that will make or break students. This practice puts 18 weeks of work at risk based on a project that might, at most, have consumed four weeks of the semester.

A small but growing number of school systems are tackling the issue head-on with comprehensive plans for effective grading practices. (The policy developed by one such district, Grand Island Public Schools in Nebraska, is available at http://wikiassessments.editme.com/files/GradingandReporting/G%26R%20Guiding%20Docs.pdf.)

But even in districts that have attempted to put effective grading policies in place, enforcement is often inconsistent. Grading seems to be regarded as the last frontier of individual teacher discretion. The same school leaders and community members who would be indignant if sports referees were inconsistent in their rulings continue to tolerate inconsistencies that have devastating effects on student achievement.

High-Stakes Grading

The Alliance for Excellent Education estimated that the annual cost of high school failure exceeds $330 billion ("An Economic Case," 2007). Some of these failures are no doubt caused by excessive absences and poor student performance. But, as the experiment at the beginning of this column clearly indicates, many failures are caused by the differences in teacher grading policies.

Do another experiment: Randomly select 30 course failures from the last semester, and determine the cause for failure. Two common causes are missing homework and poor performance on a single major assignment—a term paper, lab, or project. What would it mean to your school if you could reduce the number of failing grades resulting solely from uncompleted homework?

The stakes of grading practices are not limited to student failure. When grading policies improve, discipline and morale almost always follow. For example, Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, achieved a remarkable reduction in course failures through focused attention on improved feedback and intervention for students (Reeves, 2006). I recently checked in with the school, and Principal Joel McKinney reported that the success of this challenging urban school (74 percent free and reduced-price lunch, high mobility, and increasing numbers of English language learners) did not stop with reducing 9th and 10th grade failures. As of fall 2007, enrollment in advanced placement classes had increased 32 percent; suspensions had declined 67 percent; elective opportunities in music, art, and technology had increased; class cuts and tardiness had fallen significantly; teacher morale and school climate had noticeably improved—and the course failure rate had continued to decline (personal communication, December 5, 2007). When schools take steps to reduce failures, lots of good things happen.

The Steps to Take

Although changing grading systems is a challenging leadership task, the benefits are so great that it's worth doing.

First, create a sense of urgency. Identify the exact cost of inconsistent grading practices. How many failures can we prevent this semester if we improve our grading practices?

Second, identify teacher leaders who are already improving policies. Chances are that some teachers in your school have already eliminated the use of the average and the zero on a 100-point scale and created meaningful opportunities for corrective feedback outside of grades. Provide a forum for these teachers to share their insights with colleagues and lead the effort to develop improved policies.

Third, get the facts; gather evidence that will create a rationale for decision making. At the end of the day, your choices about teaching practice must be guided by evidence, not opinions. For example, although many people sincerely believe that giving poor grades as a punishment is effective, Guskey (2000) has marshaled 90 years of evidence to the contrary.

Fourth, reassure parents, students, and teachers that certain things will not change. Students will still have letter grades, transcripts, honor rolls, individualized education plans, and everything else that they have counted on as part of their grading system. What they won't have is irrational grading policies that give students widely different grades for the same work.

The benefits of effective grading practices are not limited to a reduced failure rate—although that benefit alone is sufficient to justify change. When student failures decrease, student behavior improves, faculty morale is better, resources allocated to remedial courses and course repetitions are reduced, and resources invested in electives and advanced courses increase. When was the last time a single change in your school accomplished all that?

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