

Grading teacher's grading policies (A guide for principals)

Stephen J. Friedman

What constitutes sound testing and grading strategies? Here is one set of guidelines that principals might find useful when evaluating teachers. Holding teachers more accountable for their grading practices should have a positive effect on the overall school climate.

Hills' (1991) article on "Apathy Concerning Grading and Testing" contained an interesting idea. After describing a number of inappropriate practices used by teachers, he proposed that principals base their evaluations of teacher performance, in part, on testing and grading practices used by teachers. The idea makes sense to me, but depends on the principal having a set of criteria in mind.

Over the years, there has been a good deal of interest in appropriate grading practices; much of what follows is based on the collective wisdom of experts as reflected in textbooks, and some common sense. It is important to realize, however, that there is little that compels teachers to be knowledgeable about these practices, let alone use them.

1. Understand the teacher's perspective.

Teachers tend to find a way to have their grading policy reflect their own deeply held beliefs (not necessarily knowledge) about how students should be graded, even if building or district-level grading policies exist. Often, this is a reflection of how their own teachers graded them and is characterized by a strong sense of ownership. Principals should not be too surprised if raising questions about grading practices evokes some fairly powerful reactions from teachers.

2. Ask for a copy of the teacher's grading policy

Teachers should submit a copy of their grading policy to the principal. I'm not talking about the classroom rules: Be in your seat when the bell rings, no gum chewing, etc. Some research indicates that many teachers see grading and behavior management as the same thing; they are not. What principals need to see is a detailed explanation of how the student will be graded-what pieces of student work will contribute to the final grade; what percentage each one counts; how often grading information will be gathered; how the pieces are combined to get a final grade; what grading scale will be used, and so forth.

It is a plus if the written policy includes a course description with the general instructional objectives the teacher hopes to accomplish. These objectives should be stated in terms of what students will be able to know or do by the end of the course. It is also helpful if teachers include their philosophical perspective on grading-an indication that they have thought deeply about the process. Principals should regard this as a contract between the teacher and students.

3. Beware of traits that do not measure achievement.

Work that counts toward the final grade should include such factors as tests, quizzes, assignments, and projects. Most of us probably have a clear idea of how a test results in some kind of a score that could be used for grading purposes.

But what if a teacher lists something like "attitude" or "effort"? Principals should question how such

traits are assessed. What do they mean? Does the teacher keep track of the attitude displayed by each student each day and assign a score? Is each student's level of effort similarly measured each day? What about other traits like student ability or behavior?

I believe that attitude, effort, ability, behavior, and the like should not affect grades at all, because grades should reflect the level of student achievement in each course. If there is interest in non-achievement traits, the report card should have a place where this information can be shared, separate from the course grade. If teachers are allowed to mix something like attitude with course grades, there is a real danger that grades will be strongly influenced by teacher opinions as opposed to work that can be graded objectively.

4. Consider the quality of the grading information.

When a test is given, a fundamental expectation is that the students have been taught what is to be tested. Do teachers routinely articulate their objectives and then develop an assessment that measures whether or not the objectives have been achieved? Classroom activities should revolve around ensuring students perform well on the assessment, thereby indicating that objectives have been mastered. Often, however, teachers develop instructional strategies or materials without a clear vision of their objectives or the assessment. Or worse, the end-of-unit test found in the textbook dictates the instruction.

On the grading policy, principals should expect teachers to state their general instructional objectives for the course. Then, as teachers are observed as part of the evaluation cycle, the principal should ask the teacher to produce the specific learning outcomes that are the focus for the lesson being observed and the assessment that will be used, to see if the outcomes have been achieved. Principals should be concerned if the teacher cannot produce the assessment. Having the outcomes and the assessment gives principals a context within which they can judge the quality of the instruction being observed.

5. Think about the role of homework.

Teachers commonly grade almost everything students do. Some have reported to me they have 40-50 items in their gradebook for each quarter. Some run out of room. Teachers have also admitted to me they would rather not score all that homework, but if they don't, students will not do it. Something may be gained, but there is also something lost.

Many teachers like to point out to students that they can learn from their mistakes. Homework gives students a chance to see if they have mastered certain knowledge or skills. It is a chance to practice. I would like to see teachers (with the support of principals) explore other ways to motivate students to do their homework. At some point, teachers will administer a test of some kind to see if student have learned from the mistakes they were free to make while doing homework. These are the scores that should be used in assigning final grades. Certainly some work/projects done at home could be used for grading purposes, but many teachers grade every assignment, which pressures students to get it right the first time.

6. Expect teachers to use numbers.

If the teacher is entering letter grades-i.e., A's, B's, etc.-into the gradebook, there is cause for concern. Many teachers have grown accustomed to assigning letter grades to everything. This is probably because the standard letter grade system is easily understood by students and parents or guardians.

Perhaps they even demand this system.

But what do teachers do with a string of letters at the end of a grading period? How do they arrive at the final grade? Well, many teachers change the letters back to a number (an A = 4 points, a B = 3 points, etc.), average those numbers, and assign a final grade. But much information about student performance is lost in the process. Worse yet, they may simply peruse the series of letters and estimate the level of performance. The greatest precision is maintained by keeping the information in its original form—a number—until a letter grade must be assigned.

7. Know how numbers should be combined.

How should teachers combine the numbers in their gradebooks? Usually, teachers count things differently—e.g., tests will be worth more than quizzes. Be sure the teacher figures a separate score for each part of the final grade. For example, if the student has taken nine tests during the quarter, a final score just for tests should be figured. Once this is done for all parts of the final grade—tests, quizzes, assignments, projects, etc.—it is important that teachers count each part as much as they said they would (check the written grading policy). If, for example, the tests were to count 60 percent, they must affect the final grade by that much.

This can be done in various ways, but the important thing is that teachers should be able to explain the process to both students and parents or guardians. They might practice by seeing if they can explain it to the principal. If teachers seem reluctant to do this, it may be because they have a string of numbers (or worse yet, letter grades) for each student that are not grouped by tests, quizzes, etc. It may also be that teachers are not able to do the necessary calculations, even though grading software makes this job fairly easy. As a result, teachers often do not actually follow what is written in their own grading policies.

8. Encourage consumerism.

Students have a right to information that helps them understand their level of competence, and principals should support this right. When teachers go over tests with students, some description of how the group performed should be made available. I encourage my own students to keep track of their scores during the semester and check with me if something doesn't seem right when the final grade is assigned. Their scores and the overall performance of the class on any test/assignment are always available to them on the spot. I have found that teachers are sometimes not receptive to requests of this nature; perhaps they see it as a challenge to their authority.

After each test, I share with students information about the group's performance, usually a list of the scores and the average score. I also help them interpret their score by posting the range of scores for each letter grade. I remind them, however, that it is their score that will be recorded in the gradebook and weighted as described in the grading policy. Great care is taken to protect each student's right to privacy with respect to his or her performance. I would like to see students (and their parents or guardians), with the support of the principal, feel comfortable asking for grading information when questions arise.

9. Demand fairness.

To me, the foundation of grading is fairness. Principals should be open to the possibility that an individual teacher might not agree. I was recently involved in a situation where a teacher who, without

grounds, raised the final grade of one student because he had vociferously complained. What about the rest of the students in the class who might be less vocal (or more fearful)? Or consider teachers who count attitude, effort, ability, or behavior as a major part of the course grade. How do teachers begin to fairly assess such traits in all their students? These should be regarded as serious threats to fairness. The key is to have each teacher's policy in writing and not hesitate to discuss fairness issues with teachers if a problem arises. If we do not begin with the expectation that all students will be treated fairly (to the extent this is humanly possible), it will be impossible to know what grades mean.

10. Hold teachers accountable

Teachers should know that grading competently is perhaps the most important service they provide their students. Principals should not hesitate to send that message. Generally, teachers have not been held accountable for the grading practices they use. Principals who communicate their expectations will help ensure greater accountability in grading.

These guidelines can be used to help principals grade a teacher's grading policy. But we can't have it both ways. It seems clear that there is great interest in grading among principals, but is there the will to hold teachers accountable for their grading practices? This would mean that the "wiggle room" that is often inherent in a teacher's grading policy would be reduced, and greater precision would be expected.

Do we want teachers to have sufficient "wiggle room" so a student who earns a B for a course can be assigned a higher grade because he had a good attitude, tried hard, didn't have very high ability to begin with, or behaved really well? How do we know students are trying hard? Even if they are, shouldn't actual competence in the subject matter be reflected in a course grade as opposed to actions that might please the teacher? In the end, long after grades are forgotten, won't the real achievements of students matter most? I would encourage principals to demand a grading policy from each teacher that ensures a fair evaluation of what students know and can do.

Students' Rights

Principals might be interested in whether students or their parents or guardians have a legal right to question teachers' grading practices. Court rulings have been mixed in cases where grades have been reduced as a punishment for student misbehavior and/or nonattendance. In *Wermuth v Bernstein* (1965), the New Jersey commissioner of education wrote:

The use of marks or grades as deterrents or as punishment is likewise usually ineffective in producing the desired results and is not educationally defensible. Whatever system of marks and grades a school may devise will have serious inherent limitations at best, and it must not be further handicapped by attempting to serve disciplinary purposes also.

In *Dorsey v Bales* (1976), the court of appeals upheld a lower court ruling that reducing the grades of a student who had been absent due to a suspension for misbehavior was invalid. The suspension negated the school board's authority to impose additional sanctions (grade reductions).

I am not encouraging legal action in cases involving grading and certainly do not presume to have provided a complete legal history here. What is probably most important to realize is that there have been rulings like those described above, and teachers' grading practices can be expected to fall within certain guidelines. Generally, though, if grading can be characterized as arbitrary, capricious, or in bad faith, then perhaps grounds for legal action exist.

But should it even come to that? I don't see much that is unreasonable in the expectations I have outlined above. On the other hand, I have seen some pretty unreasonable grading policies. I would prefer to see teachers adhere to professional standards like those developed by the National Council on Measurement in Education (1995) when grading students. But there is no mechanism for peer oversight within the field of teaching. Thus, I would argue for administrative oversight, and principals can be the key.

Teachers have told me they do not include many details on their written grading policy because students would not understand them. Some have also admitted that a vaguely stated grading policy makes it easier for them to modify it for individual students. As a result, students are sometimes left with little recourse if a problem arises. Perhaps principals have been kept at a disadvantage, also. I would like to see the entire policy, in writing, out on the table so everyone—principals, students, and parents/guardians—knows what to expect.

I believe the overall climate within the school would be enhanced by expecting teachers to grade students in accordance with the guidelines presented here. If written grading guidelines that measured up to a standard became the norm in schools, I believe we would have more students who feel confidence in the way that they are evaluated. Expectations would be clear, and students would worry less about having their grades affected by factors not germane to their competence in the subject matter. Outcomes like these warrant the principal's commitment to upgrading teachers' grading practices.

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Do our grading systems contribute to dumbing down?

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What do grades really mean? Do they translate from one school or classroom to the next? What do we hope to accomplish by giving grades? Should a school have a consistent grading policy? Do the traditional A, B, C, D, and grades truly reflect what we want to convey?

I believe that each of these questions should be answered by the educators at every school in America if we are to regain the confidence of our constituents.

The Way We Grade

Many educators today are questioning the way we grade students. Mastery learning and outcome-based education (OBE) have helped to focus a great deal of attention on grading, which may have contributed to what some have called "dumbing down," or the lowering of standards and expectations. We have questioned the role of competition, honor rolls, tracking, and standardized tests. These trends have caused non-educators to question our motives and, in some cases, our sanity.

We need to analyze where these trends in education have led us, and if we are where we want to be. Should we constantly jump on every bandwagon without thinking of the ramifications that the approach may have, or should we take all these new ideas and show some moderation as we implement them?

Each of the trends we have embraced in education has merit. Each of them, if we had shown moderation, might have helped us gain the confidence of the public and slowed the roller coaster we have ridden for the last several decades. There are many good points in OBE, mastery learning, cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, etc., but we have come under criticism for the way we dove in to implement each trend. Had we taken the time to analyze what is useful in this trend and then moved forward cautiously, we might have come under less criticism.

According to Stephen Friedman, associate professor of educational measurement at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (NASSP, 1995), educators need to design an approach to grading that supports rather than discourages student learning. When developing a grading strategy teachers need to think about the values they and their institution share.

If a teacher or school feels that grades should reflect content mastery, an absolute scale should be used. If a teacher or school feels that grades should compare students against each other, a flexible scale should be used. Are attendance, behavior, tardies, homework, parent expectations, and class participation factors in grades? This complex and critical decision--how to grade students--is often not properly thought through, and even less often explained to parents and students at the beginning of the school year.

The Way We Should Grade?

Many schools are exploring block scheduling. If your school is considering or has adopted a block scheduling model, it has taken a philosophical turn that should lead to rethinking your grading policy. If your school is using block scheduling, you are taking a new look at the way you do business. A grading scale is an arbitrary range that sends a message to students and their parents; be sure that message is the one you want to send.

In block scheduling students may have more time to achieve outcomes. If that is the case (Canady and Rettig, 1995), you will most certainly want to consider using grades of "I" for "incomplete," "NY" for "not yet," or "E" for "exposed" rather than restricting yourself to A, B, C, D, or F.

In a math class, for example, a student who has mastered some of the course outcomes, let's say at the 60 percent level, is not the same as a student who has mastered none of the course outcomes. With a traditional grading scale they would both receive a grade of "F"; there is no way to tell the difference. There is, however, a real difference in learning.

A grade is a vehicle for communicating with students, parents, colleagues, and colleges. To communicate well we must make sure that the grade we give reflects the student's degree of mastery of

the course outcomes.

If an algebra course has 12 outcomes for the year and a student demonstrates mastery of 7, a traditional grader could be tempted to give that student an "F." According to Canady and Rettig (1995) that student should receive an I (Incomplete or NY (Not Yet) under a block scheduling model that allows students to have a reasonable amount of additional time to successfully master the course standards. They would advocate giving a grade of E (Exposed) when the student has gained some knowledge, but not enough to continue with the next course in the sequence.

This student will probably need to repeat the course the next semester or during summer school, if he or she wishes to continue in the sequence. In my algebra example, this student might be able to demonstrate mastery of 3 or 4 of the course outcomes, certainly not enough to continue in algebra with any chance for success.

Keep in mind that a grade is meant to be a form of communication and a grade of F says the student has failed. That is not exactly a ringing endorsement for the student's self-esteem. If the student deserves an F because he or she has not tried to learn, as evidenced by lack of work or attendance, that should be indicated differently than a student who deserves the F because he or she was lying hard but did not learn. If the student can be successful with more time, try the I, NY, or E. If it is unlikely that the student will be successful, the F is appropriate.

While enhancing student self-esteem is not a primary goal in grading, we should not needlessly hurt the student's self-esteem. In many block scheduling models there is room to provide students with extra time. If we don't utilize that time to help our students perform better, we are missing one of the major benefits in block scheduling. While self-esteem is not our primary goal, we do not want to have a needless negative impact on a student's self-esteem.

The Purpose of Grading

When looking at these possibilities, we must remember our purpose for grades, i.e., to communicate progress to students and parents. If we want to communicate accurately, we need to expand the choices available for teachers to use so the purpose can be realized. If we have high expectations for our students, we need to establish the expectations early and demand that students meet the expectations. One way we can make demands on our students is to motivate them to achieve by working with parents to establish the relevance and importance of what we are doing in school.

What should be the relationship between the grades and national tests? There should be some consistency between the grades given in your high school and national tests such as the ACT and SAT. Do your honor roll students perform at levels that translate to well above average on the college entrance tests? If there is not a relationship between grades at your school and the national tests, you are not adequately communicating to your parents and students about their academic progress relative to the real world.

If the students who receive top grades in your school cannot match that level of performance on the national tests, you may have consistently inflated grades. If the grades are inflated, why are they inflated? Are your expectations too low? Despite our continued cry as educators that standardized tests are not the be-all and end-all of education, they are a measure of how well students perform against an acknowledged standard. If a student gets A's in a school, that student should be able to perform well on national tests.

Many educators are frustrated by the lack of intrinsic motivation shown by students. Rather than allowing that lack of motivation to breed failure, we need to find ways to motivate the students. One of our primary functions as educators is to motivate students so they will want to learn what we have determined they should know or be able to do.

We need to stop pointing the finger at others and take steps to solve the problems we identify. The students in our schools are the best that their parents have. Our job is to educate them to the best of our ability. I don't often hear medical doctors throwing in the towel simply because a patient has done so.

There are several other areas to consider: What is the relationship between behavior and grades? Is it a behavioral or an academic issue if a student is not doing homework? (Dockery, 1995) Many teachers deduct points for not formatting a paper the "right" way. Many teachers also consider class participation in their grades. Should behavior influence grades? One solution is to give a grade for academics and one for behavior in each class.

Did you ever get a 0 on a test, quiz, or assignment? Did you ever consider the effect a 0 grade has on a student's average in a class? Consider the student who gets the following grades in a class: 85, 80, 75, and 80. That would compute to an 80 average. What if the next grade is a 0? The average would drop from 80 to 64 based on that one 0. The student's average dropped 16 points because of the one miss. Wouldn't it be fairer to the student if the median were used rather than the mean? Under that scenario, the average would not be dramatically affected.

A grading policy should be developed that supports the vision, mission, and beliefs of the school. A key to sound grading is a sound philosophical base grounded in a school's or teacher's beliefs. What do you hope to accomplish through grading? What does an A really mean? Those are questions you can answer if you have that set of beliefs to support your grading policy. Your grading philosophy should also be consistent with your other policies and procedures, as well as your organizational design.

If your school supports academic excellence and does not believe in "dumbing down," you need a set of policies that support that desire for excellence. If your grades truly represent that you demand excellence, teachers will not give grades to students who have not legitimately earned those grades. The concept of "not yet" or "in progress" is a more realistic assessment of where a student is than a grade that hasn't been earned.

To hold a student accountable for successfully learning the required material is supporting excellence. To give that student a grade he or she has not earned is "dumbing down." By using this approach you are at no time misleading students or parents about the student's learning. If your policy is that at some point time is up, the interim grade should be changed to something that will indicate the necessary learning has not occurred. It is certainly necessary to have all grades converted to permanent ones for transcript purposes so that universities and other schools can reasonably interpret student transcripts.

Summary

Each school should have a philosophy of grading that is embraced by the entire faculty. That philosophy should realistically communicate progress to parents and students. Where appropriate, we should use additional grades beyond the traditional A, B, C, D, and F that will indicate how much more needs to be learned to meet our expectations. Student grades should not be based upon the behavior of the student but on the students' learning, nor should students be given grades they have not legitimately

earned. There should be a relationship between the grades in your school and national tests such as the ACT and SAT. Finally, there should be some agreement among educators as to what we can and should expect from our students.

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