

# Fixing Grading Policies that Undermine Standards

By Thomas R. Guskey From *NASSP Bulletin*

**D**ESCRIBED here are four school policies used for grading students that impose procedural barriers on standards-based reforms. Also described is how to correct them.

**1. Grading “on the curve.”** In a standards-based system, grading and reporting must be done in reference to specific learning criteria, not to normative criteria or “on the curve.” In other words, students must be graded in terms of what they have learned and are able to do, not in terms of their relative standing among classmates.

Grading on the curve makes learning a highly competitive activity in which students compete against one another for the few scarce rewards (high grades) distributed by the teacher. Students readily see that helping others succeed threatens their own chances for success. High

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grades are attained not through excellence in performance, but simply by doing better than one's classmates. Learning becomes a game of winners and losers, and because the number of rewards is kept arbitrarily small, most students are forced to be losers.

Perhaps most important, grading on the curve tells nothing about what students have learned or are able to do—only a student's relative standing among classmates, based on what are often ill-defined criteria. High-graded students might actually have performed very poorly in terms of established learning standards, but simply less poorly than their classmates. Differences between grades are difficult to interpret at best, and meaningless at worst.

Furthermore, modern research has shown that the seemingly direct relationship between aptitude or intelligence and school achievement depends on instructional conditions, not on a normal distribution curve. When the instructional quality is high and well matched to students' learning needs, the magnitude of this relationship diminishes drastically and approaches zero. Moreover, the fairness and equity of grading "on the curve" are a myth.

**Remedy:** Grading and reporting should always be done in reference to specific learning criteria. At all levels of education, teachers should identify what they want their students to learn, what evidence they will use to verify that learning, and what criteria they will use to judge that evidence. In other words, teachers should clarify their standards and their grading criteria on the basis of those standards. Grades based on specified learning criteria and standards have direct meaning and serve communication purposes well.

**2. Selecting valedictorians.** Most schools operate under the traditional premise that there can be only one valedictorian. This commonly results in severe, sometimes bitter competition among high-achievers to be that one. Early in their high school careers, top students figure out the selection procedures and then, often with their parents' help, find ingenious ways to improve their standing compared to classmates. To gain that honor, a student must not simply excel, but must outdo the other students in the class. And sometimes the difference among these top students is as little as one one-thousandth of a decimal point in a weighted grade-point average.

**Remedy:** An increasing number of high schools have resolved this problem by naming multiple valedictorians, similarly to colleges and universities naming graduates cum laude, magna cum laude, and summa cum laude. West Springfield High School, in Fairfax County, Virginia, for

example, typically graduates 15 to 25 valedictorians each year, each with an exemplary academic record that includes the highest grade possible in numerous honors and Advanced Placement classes. Instead of trying to distinguish among these exceptional students, the faculty named all of them valedictorians.

Rather than creating additional, arbitrary criteria to discriminate among these high-achievers, they recognized the excellent achievement and performance of the entire group. And because the West Springfield faculty believes their purpose as teachers is not to select talent but to develop it, they take great pride in these results. All of the valedictorians are named at the graduation ceremony, and one student, selected by the fellow valedictorians, makes a major presentation.

Some might object to a policy that allows multiple valedictorians, arguing that colleges and universities demand such selection and often grant special scholarships to students who attain that singular distinction. But current evidence indicates this is not the case. In processing admission applications and making decisions about scholarships, colleges and universities are far more interested in the rigor of the curriculum students have experienced.

In fact, an index composed of the number of Advanced Placement courses taken, the highest level of math studied, and total number of courses completed has been shown to be a much stronger predictor of college success than standardized test scores, grade point average, or class rank. The rigor of the academic program experienced by the valedictorians from West Springfield High School has helped them gain admission and win scholarships to many of the most selective colleges and universities in the nation.

The process by which class valedictorians are selected is another example of a policy that continues not because educators have thought about it deeply, but simply because they have "always done it that way." It is also a policy that hinders implementation of standards-based reforms. Better understanding of the consequences of such a policy allows educators to implement improved and more appropriate policies that benefit students and teachers alike.

Recognizing excellence in academic performance is a vital aspect in any learning community. However, such recognition need not be based on arbitrary standards and deleterious competition. Instead, it can and should be based on clear models of excellence that exemplify our highest standards and goals for students and for ourselves. And if many students meet these high standards of excellence, all the better.

**3. Using grades as a form of punishment.** Although educators would undoubtedly prefer that motivation to learn be entirely

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intrinsic, grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth. Studies show that most students view high grades as positive recognition of their success, and some work hard to avoid the consequences of low grades.

At the same time, no studies support the use of low grades or marks as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many students regard the low grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade, but they may feel helpless to make any improvement.

Sadly, some teachers consider grades or reporting forms as their "weapon of last resort." In their view, students who do not comply with their requests must suffer the consequences of the greatest punishment a teacher can bestow: a failing grade. Such practices have no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affect students, teachers, and the relationship they share.

**Remedy:** Rather than attempting to punish students with a low grade or mark in the hope that this will prompt greater effort in the future, teachers can better motivate students by considering their work as incomplete and then requiring additional effort. Recognizing this, some schools have initiated grading policies that eliminate the use of failing grades altogether.

Teachers at Beachwood Middle School, in Beachwood, Ohio, for example, record students' grades as A, B, C, or I (Incomplete). Students who receive an "I" grade are required to do additional work to bring their performance up to an acceptable level. This policy is based on the belief that students perform at a failure level or submit failing work in large part because teachers accept it. If teachers no longer accept substandard work, Beachwood educators reason, then students will not submit it; and, with appropriate support, will continue to work until their performance is satisfactory.

Beachwood Middle School teachers strongly believe that giving a failing grade to students who have not performed well, despite their ability to do so, offers these students an easy way out of schoolwork. By contrast, if teachers insist that all assignments designed to demonstrate learning be completed and done well, then students will choose to do their work in a timely fashion and at a satisfactory level of quality. The guiding maxim of the teachers at Beachwood is "If it's not done well, then it's not done!"

Implementing grading policies such as this naturally requires additional funding for the necessary support mechanisms. Students who receive an "I" grade at Beachwood, for example, are required to

attend after-school sessions or special Saturday school programs staffed by teachers, volunteer parents, and older students. Those who are unable or unwilling to do the make-up work during the school year must attend required summer school sessions designed to help them bring their performance up to an acceptable level.

Although these support mechanisms demand commitment and additional funding, schools implementing such programs generally find them highly successful. Many also discover that they actually save money in the long run. Because this regular and ongoing support helps students remedy their learning difficulties before they become major problems, less time and fewer resources need to be spent in major remediation efforts later on.

At all levels of education, we need to think seriously about the use of failing grades. Although honesty must prevail in assessment and evaluation of student learning, we also must consider the negative consequences of assigning failing grades to students' work or level of performance. Especially in the early years of school, the negative consequences of failing grades are quite serious and far outweigh any benefits.

Even in upper grades, the fear of failure is a questionable motivation device. Better and more effective alternatives to failing grades need to be found, especially in a standards-based system. The use of "I" grades or incomplete grades presents one meaningful alternative, especially if the necessary policies and resources are put in place to support those students who need additional assistance.

**4. Using zeros in grading.** Many teachers assign zeros to students' work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late. However, the zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student learned or is able to do. Instead, zeros are typically assigned to punish students for not displaying appropriate effort or demonstrating adequate responsibility. If the grade is to represent how well students have learned or mastered established learning standards, then assigning zeros clearly misses the mark.

The effect of assigning zeros is intensified if combined with averaging to attain a student's overall course grade. Students readily see that a single zero leaves them little chance for success because it drastically skews the average. That is why, for example, in scoring Olympic events such as gymnastics, diving, or ice skating, the highest and lowest scores are always eliminated. If they were not, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores.

Some teachers defend zeros by arguing that they can't give students

credit for work that is incomplete or not turned in—and that is certainly true. But there are far better ways to motivate and encourage students to complete assignments in a timely manner than with zeros, especially considering the overwhelmingly negative effects.

**Remedy:** Students certainly should learn to accept responsibility for their actions and be held accountable for their work. But, no evidence demonstrates that assigning zeros helps teach students these lessons. Unless educators are willing to admit that grades are used to show evidence of students' lack of effort and responsibility, then alternatives to assigning zeros must be found.

One way is to assign an "I" (or Incomplete) grade with explicit requirements for completing the work, as addressed earlier. For example, students whose work is incomplete or late might be required to attend after-school study sessions or special Saturday classes until their work is completed to a satisfactory level. In other words, they are not "let off the hook" with a zero.

Instead, students learn that they have certain responsibilities in school and that their actions have specific consequences. Not completing assigned work on time means that students must attend special after-school sessions to complete the work. As already noted, this policy may require additional funding and support, but the payoffs are likely to be great. Not only is this more beneficial to students than assigning a zero, it is a lot more fair. It helps make the grade a more accurate reflection of what students have learned.

To implement standards-based reforms, educators must take a broader and more systemic view of their efforts. Instead of focusing narrowly on curriculum and assessment issues, they must expand their perspective to consider organizational policies that can hinder success, especially in grading and reporting student learning.

Although grading will always be a process of professional judgment, making those judgments requires careful thought and continual reflection on the purpose of the activity. If grades are to represent information about the adequacy of students' achievement and performance with respect to clear learning standards, then the evidence used to determine grades must denote what students have learned and are able to do. To allow other factors to influence grades or marks misrepresents students' learning attainment.

Grading requires careful planning, thoughtful judgment, clear focus on purpose, excellent communication skills, and an overriding concern for students. Such qualities are necessary to ensure grading policies and practices that provide high-quality information on student learning in any standards-based learning environment. *et*