



Guidance for High School Teachers on Research-Based Grading Practices

While the current health crisis has been devastating for education as a whole, it has created the necessity for accelerated professional growth to meet the challenge. In an effort to reflect more accurately what students know or be able to do in this remote setting, there has been an increased interest in grading practices and professional reflection on the impact those practices have on students. There are decades of research on grading by people such as Doug Reeves, Dr Tom Guskey and Joe Feldman. The Curriculum and Instruction Department has synthesized much of this research to provide a limited number of recommendations for more accurate and equitable grading practices. Some students will ultimately fail classes due to a lack of engagement or lack of basic proficiency in the content, but our goal is to provide guidance for additional ways that students can demonstrate their learning. These are not mandates, but districts across the nation have shown these changes to have a positive impact on student achievement.

#1 Grade for content and skill proficiency and not for behaviors.

Traditional grading practices that reflect compliance with rules and procedures have minimal motivational value and no punitive impact. Fostering critical organizational skills and supporting effective classroom management are undeniably important, but more effectively addressed with strategies other than grades.

Examples of grading behaviors include:

- Taking points off for late work
- Grades for attendance labeled as “participation”
- Grades for homework that is an excessive amount of skills practice
- Grades for notebook organization
- Returning signed documents or other compliance
- If there is a question, ask yourself “What standard does this demonstrate proficiency in?”

More promising practices:

- Allow students multiple ways of demonstrating their understanding.
- Concentrate on what is essential and let go of the rest. (I’m looking at you seek-and-find worksheets!)
- Competency-based grading- Less detailed than standards-based grading, this is a reflection of what a student can demonstrate knowing or being able to do as it relates to a cluster of standards. [Here](#) is an article from Fisher & Frey on competency-based grading during remote instruction.
- Replacing practice homework with opportunities for revision based on feedback.
- Use assessments FOR learning as well as OF learning by allowing students to complete more practice, review or tutoring and then to re-test.
- Having students submit assignments labeled with their ID number rather than name to guard against unconscious bias.
- Instead of extra-credit, allow a student to revise and resubmit an assignment.
- Some schools are exploring standards-based grading.

#2 Reflect on the way you calculate grades.

The most frequent recommendation that is made by grade reform advocates is letting go of the 100 point scale. Our traditional letter grade scale has a range of 10 points for each passing grade and a 60 point range for failing. This has the effect of allowing one missing assignment to negate several high-quality assignments. It also breeds a sense of futility for students who feel that they can quickly reach a point where it doesn't matter if they master the content, as a passing grade is no longer numerically possible.

A more promising practice:

- Replace "0"s with "50"s to equalize the grade range.

Averaging also presents problems and may not reflect the bigger picture of student achievement.

Review the scenarios below:

Student 1 struggled in the early part of the marking period but continued to work hard, improved in each unit, and did excellently in unit 5.

Student 2 began with excellent performance in unit 1 but then lost motivation, declined steadily during the marking period, and received a failing mark for unit 5.

Student 3 performed steadily throughout the marking period, receiving three B's and two C's, all near the B – C cut-score.

Student 4 began the marking period poorly, failing the first two units, but with newfound interest performed excellently in units 3, 4, and 5.

Student 5 began the marking period excellently, but then lost interest and failed the last two units.

Student 6 skipped school (unexcused absence) during the first unit, but performed excellently in every other unit.

Student 7 performed excellently in the first four units, but was caught cheating on the assessment for unit 5, resulting in a score of zero for that unit.

Summary Grades Tallied by Three Different Methods

Student	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Average Score	Grade	Median Score	Grade	Deleting Lowest	Grade
1	59	69	79	89	99	79.0	C	79.0	C	84.0	B
2	99	89	79	69	59	79.0	C	79.0	C	84.0	B
3	77	80	80	78	80	79.0	C	80.0	B	79.5	C
4	49	49	98	99	100	79.0	C	98.0	A	86.5	B
5	100	99	98	49	49	79.0	C	98.0	A	86.5	B
6	0	98	98	99	100	79.0	C	98.0	A	98.8	A
7	100	99	98	98	0	79.0	C	98.0	A	98.8	A

These 7 students would all get a C- with averaging but would have a different set of grades if the median was used or if the lowest assignment was dropped. The assignments were also weighted equally even though students demonstrated different levels of proficiency by the end of the term. This is not to imply that averaging is, in itself, always bad just that you must be aware of the dramatic impact that different ways of calculating student grades impacts the outcome. A grade of “C” can represent both a student who consistently meets minimum requirements and one who is capable of very high quality work but forgets to turn things in sometimes.

More promising practices:

- Weighting assignments higher or allocating more points at the end of the term when students have had time to develop proficiency and demonstrate growth
- Weighting and allocating points on assignments that address the essential standards heavier.
- Consider using the median rather than the average if it more accurately reflects student patterns of performance.
- Whatever calculation method you choose, be able to articulate why it is the fairest and most accurate

#3 Clearly identify and communicate what is to be learned and what a model assignment should look like.

Students should be able to respond, “By the end of this assignment or lesson, I will know _____ and be able to_____.” When students know why they are doing what they are doing and what they will accomplish, they feel more respected and have a sense of agency in their own learning. The content standards were written for educators and have little meaning for students. They need to know how they will be smarter and better at something. The best way to hold students to a high standard is by making sure that they understand clearly what a high quality outcome or product will look like. Students can be a part of co-creating those expectations.

More promising practices:

- Providing rubrics for larger assignments and a consistent rubric for things like written responses.
- Prioritize the essential standards.
- Make sure that homework is relevant and aligned to the learning objectives.
- Provide model assignments that communicate your level of expectation.
- Allow students to use the rubric to self-assess prior to turning in assignments.
- Give frequent and specific feedback about how to improve or recognize improvement and identify the specifics.
- Utilize ParentVue to ensure that parents have an accurate view of students’ current grade.

Some selected reading:

[School Grading Policies are Failing Children- A Call to Action for Equitable Grading by Joe Feldman](#)
[What’s Worth Fighting Against in Grading by Doug Reeves](#)
[Compiled Readings and Presentations by Dr. Tom Guskey](#)